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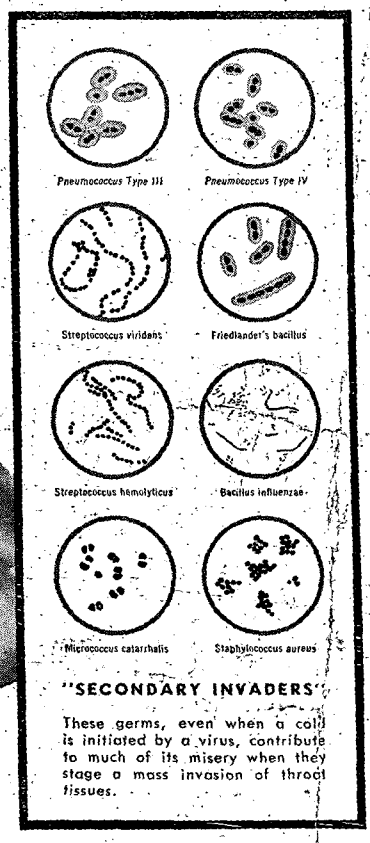

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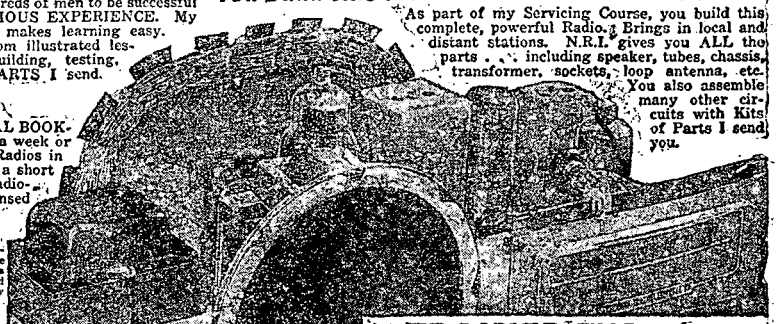

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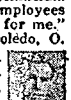

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Weird Tales

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NOVELETTE

HOME TO MOTHER . . . . . Manly Wade Wellman 4

Whatever was to live through man-made catastrophe on earth would be bound to be altered into the sort of monster that alone could survive—horror piled on horror.

SHORT STORIES

TWO FACE . . . . . Frank Belknap Long 19

Until now we have been free to speculate on the planetary mysteries of the universe, but on some great tomorrow these mysteries shall be known—for better or worse.

THE SHADOW OF SATURN . . . . . E. Hoffmann Price 30

Wish is a firecracker, will is an A-bomb. Wishing is an emotional muddle; willing is pure force.

THE TREE'S WIFE . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 43

Her young husband shot, her Paw in a hospital, how could she do anything else but marry a tree?

THE CORN DANCE . . . . . Margaret St. Clair 50

To see the Corn Dance—and talk about it afterwards—that was an experience few terrestrials could have.

TAKE THE Z TRAIN . . . . . Allison V. Harding 60

At the end of a hot monotonous day at work do you dare long for something truly different?

STAY WITH ME . . . . . Shelby Steger 66

It was a comforting assurance that one need not be afraid either of living or dying.

THE HUNGRY GHOST . . . . . Emil Petaja 74

"He's come back, Doctor! He won't let me eat because I starved him to death!"

DEAD MAN'S SHOES . . . . . Day Keene 81

He had never killed anyone, blasphemed, nor stolen and what had it got him? A sentence of death at forty.

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Next to humanity, rats are perhaps best fitted to conquer and rule . . . .

Home to MOTHER

By Manly Wade Wellman

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

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FOREWORD

GREETINGS, you future generations! When you read this, you'll be the present generations. I'll have returned to Earth's dust, from which my own forefathers sprang, but to which I was born a stranger.

Forgive my poor writing, pay attention to the importance of this document, first to be written on Mother Earth since thirty thousand Earth-years ago. Whole libraries of history will tell you how the ancients tried foolishly to settle their overpopulation problems by long, destroying wars; how, about midway through their last war, several hundred smart, sane men and women retreated by spacecraft to Venus; how they settled and flourished there, profiting partially by Earth's bad example; and how they attempted a return to the home-world. My story begins there.

Read it. Commit it to memory. Never forget Dawes Wickram, the first human creature to return to Earth, who died to make possible your life here. Don't forget his comrades—Marna Murray and me—who lived to make it possible. I am Simon Roper. This is how I saw matters fall out, believe me!

"ARE your engines cut, Roper?" Captain Dawes Wickram called through the speaker-system from Control. "Lock feed and gauges, then come out."

I'd been alone in Engines Left, with just room to turn around and handle fuel mixture and tempo at word from Control and to lie on my elasto-cot when power switched to Engines Right. Thirty days I'd been in that cell smaller than a prison cell, cramped by walls studded with dials, levers, stopcocks, gauges, blast-rhythmers to power our space shooter. Cell, engines, elasto-cot, desk with slide rules and computationers for figuring engine-dope, water tap and synthetic rations. At least twice daily, never less than once and often five or six times, I'd thought I should have let them kill me back home on Venus. Now it must be nearly over.

"Yes, sir," I told the speaker, did what he said to do to gauges and feeds. My door unlocked smoothly, and there stood Dawes Wickram, as I'd seen him last.

Bony slim, even slimmer than I'd become in that wearing month, face skull-gaunt but with no skull grin or soft stare. His lips were lock-panel tight, his eyes probe-ray brilliant. He looked dressed for inspection—silk-metal everywhere, none of your low-caste elascoid. His shoulder-tabs and brassards of captain's rank shone like heat lines. Ditto his silverite belt, his electro-automatic pistol, his hand-throw ray, his ceremonial dagger. Sharp was the word for Dawes Wickram's rigout, and for his attitude and his nature. "Come out into the passage," he invited.

Thirty days long I'd seen only my engine workings. I moved out at his gesture, into a broad corridor that led forward to Control. Wickram held a speaker-mike, and touched a stud. "All right, Murray," he said into it. "You come out, too."

He touched the catch of a panel beside the one I'd come out at. It opened, and forth stepped a slim little slice of a young woman, in brown elascoid slacks and jersey. She looked pale alongside Wickram's aristocratic lamp-tan, probably looked pale alongside my sudden blush. Her roan blonde hair was cut at ear-length. Round cheeks, big eyes and short straight nose kept her pointed chin from looking harsh. That was Engines Right—I hadn't expected my opposite number to be female. Hadn't even wondered.

"Simon Roper, this is Marna Murray," said Wickram.

"Are we coasting in to Earth?" asked Marna Murray. Her voice was awake, but husky, as if by sleep.

"Coasting in?" he repeated, grinning with tight lips. "We're in. Come forward to control and look out the view panel."

We followed him, and he lounged against the control board to let us have a good look through the glassite pane.

It was dark outside, almost but not quite. I could see that we'd landed. He hadn't even called us out to watch ourselves set down, and he'd managed it so carefully that the craft hadn't so much as bumped. Up ahead was a gloomy horizon,

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with hills, and a touch of rose in the low sky—dawn.

But if Wickram had meant to cheat us out of all the drama, he failed, at least with Marna Murray. "The first human beings to come here in sixty thousand years—forty thousand Earth-years," she figured from Venus time. Her voice was rapt. "I wonder if we can even exist here."

WICKRAM had been flicking gauges to sample the atmosphere. "Oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide," he reported. "Some bacteria, but probably our inoculations will fight them off. Now stand by for blaze signal to be observed on Venus."

Into the gloom around us spray-nozzles operated as he touched their controls. Forward, backward, to each side, he was strewing explosive powder.

"Now," he said, thumbing a spark button. Outside a bright glow, ghastly pale, deep red, turning green, then blue, then pale yellow, then red again, then all gone. My glimpse of it blinded me, and Marna Murray turned her face away. Wickram hadn't looked up.

"In thirty seconds we go out," he announced. "Me first, then Roper, then Murray."

That's the order in which three human beings again set foot on Mother Earth. Dawn was peeping over those distant hills. The air was fresher and bracing than the heavy Venusian atmosphere, and under our feet the powder-burned soil steamed from that signal blaze.

Marna Murray breathed deeply. "We're here," she said.

"And we'll stay," added Wickram. "Even if we had tools enough, we couldn't put this craft in flight order. So stop being shy, you two. Make friends. Plainly you dislike me, and I'm the only other human being on Earth."

"Are you sure, Captain Wickram?" asked Marna Murray, and we looked where she was looking, toward those heights.

The sun was rising above them. Here and there, on a saw-toothed series of hilltops, rose columns of smoke. I counted four. Wickram muttered "Gods," I think; he was a pantheist, like most Venusian intellectuals. He whipped telegoggles from his belt pouch and clamped them over his eyes.

"I see fire at one point," said Marna Murray. "Perhaps volcanic—"

"No," declared Wickram. "It's carbon smoke. Probably wood. Maybe coal."

"Forest fires, set by lightning?" I offered stupidly.

"No, they wouldn't be spaced like that. Murray, you're right to doubt my statement about being the only human creatures here."

I blew out my breath. "Men—human creatures? Earth's inhabited, after all!"

"But not necessarily by anyone we'd care to know," said Wickram.

The sun came up, smaller than on Venus, but direct and warm in the clear atmosphere. I, for one, felt spacy and open all around, after a lifetime in the misty jungles of Venus. We saw where we were. Behind, to the west, beat surf on a white, sandy beach, and there were sparse weeds and grass where our blaze powder hadn't burned them away. Watching those hills, eight or ten miles off, we saw that they were timbered here and there. The distant columns of smoke wavered in a morning breeze.

"Signal fires?" asked Wickram gently. "Or perhaps cooking fires?"

"We should find out," said Marna Murray eagerly. She looked ready to hike off toward the hills.

"Later." Wickram was sharp. "We're strangers. Let's be sure of our welcome."

He had us carry load after load of tools and supplies from the freight-chamber. We put them between our scorched landing spot and the sea. He was all captain, finding plenty for us to do, but not hoisting or hauling himself. The day was bright by the time we'd finished the detail, and when we looked to the hills again, the smoke columns were gone, as if they hadn't been there—or had been put out.

"Break out rations, Roper," Wickram ordered me.

I was struck by a feeling of strangeness that we were eating synthetic loaves on this

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planet; or maybe by a sense of being watched and evaluated. Marna Murray broke off small bits of her loaf, and once she smiled courteously at me, making me wish I hadn't just gnawed into mine. Wickram had drawn his dagger to cut thin slices. He was supposed to be elegant. "Roper," he said, munching, "they sentenced you for refusal to let Mating Bureau choose your proper consort, and then let you go when you volunteered for this mission. Right?"

"Right," I grumbled, resenting his manner.

"You're applied-science grouping," he half accused. "It's important for applied-science personnel to marry other applied-science personnel. Then progeny can be conditioned to the same needed assignment."

"I wanted to choose my own consort," I began.

"Oh, yes. You'd picked a girl from art-and-culture classification, a luxurious singing girl—"

"She wouldn't have me," I snarled. "Took a district recreationalist. I took a conviction. Only for this assignment, I'd be dead now."

"Murray," said Wickram, slicing into his loaf. "You, too, chose between execution and this mission."

"Right," said Marna Murray, barely audible. She looked away from us.

"Not as romantic as Roper, eh, Murray? Just too busy with some absorbing calculation-experiment to marry, particularly sight unseen. But," and he laughed, without parting his lips, "here you both are—"

"Captain, if you're hinting the truth, it's rotten!" I cried, and swung around toward him. He lifted his dagger, warningly.

"Good guess, Roper. Mating Bureau told you off for each other. I thought you'd like to know—and Mating Bureau got you assigned to the mission."

He chuckled, and that was the last sound until we'd finished eating. Then Marna Murray looked toward the hills again. "To think of being here," she murmured. Glancing at her, I saw that she wasn't as gaunt as I'd first thought. Slender, but not frail or bony. The sun was making her pale face rosy, too.

"We're going to explore," said Wickram. "Murray, remain on guard here. Take an electro-automatic rifle from the case yonder. Patrol around the ship and the supply dump. Observe in all directions. You're in charge until we return."

She got the rifle. "Another for Roper," bade Wickram. "Ready, Roper? Come on."

Side by side we set off inland across open, level ground. I glanced back, and Marna Murray, patrolling as ordered, was watching us. Later I glanced again, and she still watched, but she and all she guarded looked small, far away, like practically nothing across the distance we had covered.

Anybody who's been in the Venusian jungles, with clouds shoving down overhead, can guess how open and insecure a Venus-bred man would feel in such territory for the first time. I did, but if Wickram did he gave no sign of it. Once he dipped up sand and ran a quick chemical test with reagents from his belt-pouches. "Gather some grass and weed specimens," he told me. "And some of those broad-leafed plants up ahead."

We'd come two or three miles, and approached a patch of healthy-looking vegetables. Wickram, moving ahead, clucked in surprise. "Interesting growth arrangement, Roper."

It was all of that. Tufty, big-leafed plants lay in rows upon soft, dark earth. "Cultivated," said Wickram, stooping and tugging the nearest plant. Out came its broad, round root, white with a purple tinge. "That's a turnip," Wickram told me, handing it over.

You know I stared. On Venus, things like that were grown artificially and painstakingly, under glass, with special light and fertilizer. They're only for the aristocrats, the leaders and top technical chiefs. The rest of us eat synthetics, from the Venusian plants. Moving past the turnips, Wickram gouged up another plant, with lighter, fluffier top leaves. It appeared

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from the earth long and tapering, like a dagger blade, but of a sweet orange tint. "Carrot," he said "And yonder—I think they're cabbages."

I pulled up three or four more turnips. Wickram appropriated several carrots. "Not too many, Roper. If we plunder this garden, its gardener may visit us to ask why."

Again I had that sense of being watched, curiously and closely, by invisible eyes. We headed back toward our base.

"Roper," said Wickram as we tramped along with our vegetables, "why do you think there's a garden here, with no other evidence of human habitation or culture?"

"Maybe growing conditions are bad on the hills," I suggested.

"Maybe. But then why isn't the gardener's home next to his garden?"

"It seems strange, Captain."

"Probably the gardener has a good reason to build fires on the hill and grow his food on the level. Well, we're home again."

The grounded hull, the supply dump, and Marna Murray watching us come in gave me a sense of known facts about where I stood.

BUT Wickram wasn't back at camp to stay. He turned the guard detail over to me, and took Marna Murray with him to explore the beach. Watching them go, I felt lonelier than when I'd headed toward the hills. Marna Murray acted glad to go with him—he was attractive to her, probably he could be attractive to any woman if he wanted to be. When they returned, they carried their hands and pockets full of small irregular objects.

"Fauna," pronounced Wickram, dropping his cargo on a waterproof sheet. "Shellfish, our ancestors called them. Here's an oyster," and he lifted one. "These are clams. You've seen their pictures in ancient books, Roper. My tests show they're edible. We'll eat them and our vegetables for our second meal on Earth."

"What are those empty shells?" I asked.

He handed me one. "More evidence of human life. See where the hinge membrane was cut—not broken or pulled apart, but severed with a sharp instrument to get at the animal inside."

"Sharp instrument?" I echoed.

"Look," Marna Murray exhibited a knife of sorts, crude, rusty and broken. It was of simple iron, the kind that's easily smelted out of ore by a hot open fire. The broken blade was bound into a bone handle with mouldy old cord, and had been sharpened away to a scrap. When the scrap had broken, its owner had tossed it away.

"Our neighbors eat flesh as well as plants," Wickram said. "Look at the hilt-lashings of rawhide, dried and shrunken to clasp blade to handle. Primitive but skilful. Apparently living through the final war was a wipeout for civilization here, and people have progressed back to a simple iron age."

"Iron age," I repeated, remembering my school days. "Emerging from the stone age, men learned to work together, be friends, live together, produce thinkers and heroes—"

"Like Moses," added Marna Murray. "Mohammed, Hannibal, Aristotle, Homer. And poets and scientists." She sounded raptly joyous. "They prepared the ground for Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Darwin, Einstein—"

"Who prepared it for the inventors that invented civilization clear out of existence," finished Wickram harshly. "Get that thermal canister heating, Murray. We'll eat some of what we've found."

We played safe and boiled the things, but they were good. I could have taken seconds and thirds. After eating, Wickram went into the ship, probably to lie down. Marna Murray was looking at that crude broken knife. "Poor fellow," she barely whispered.

"The man with the knife?" I suggested, wondering what she meant.

"He worked so hard, Roper. Stoked his fire to smelt the ore. Toiled at some crude forge, shaping it. Blistered his hands edging it. Painstakingly carved the handle, lashed it with rawhide. Back on Venus, a

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machine turns out by the thousand, such knives as he'd think were miracles."

I half drew my own steel blade, graceful, strong, beautifully tempered and sharpened. I saw what she meant.

"He used this to the limit," she went on. "Then had to toil to make another. Life's hard for him, Roper. He and his people live on the hills. They're timid, they seek shelter there. Now we've frightened them away from their gardens, and from coming to the seashore after shellfish." She looked at me with wide, troubled eyes.

"You're supposed to have scientific detachment," I tried to tease her, but she shook her head. The roan hair stirred.

"No, scientific detachment isn't for me or you. It's for superior I. Q.'s and trainings and advantages, like Captain Wickram's. He's interested, but he isn't sorry. He doesn't care whether those people up on the hill live or die."

"He's cautious—" I began.

"But he took their vegetables, their needed food." Her words made me ashamed that I'd helped him. "Not a sign that he'll help them in return."

"Nobody was at the garden," I reminded.

"They fear us—we're terrible to them. Else they'd be there, digging or harvesting, and we'd see them and get to know them." She pointed to the hills. "And they put out their fires. This isn't the way we should come home to Mother Earth."

I felt the warmth of her impulse, and my own impulses warmed to match them—then, beyond, I saw Wickram grinning at us through the port. For the moment I felt like punching his lean, mocking face. To him we were two subordinates, mated by decision of a bureau, and he was pleased to see us getting together. He came out.

"Don't let my presence make you shy," he called. "Be friendly. Stroll around. Get to know each other. My blessing on you."

He went back in. Marna Murray watched him go, thinking. Then she put her hands inside a ration container.

"I'll give them something to pay for those vegetables," she said. "It can be part of my own ration, I'll eat less for a day or so. This synthetic loaf—it'll be novel, they might like it."

OFF she started, toward the vegetable field. I watched, then followed, and caught up as she reached the plot. She laid the loaf down on the broad leaves of a turnip plant.

"They can have this too," I said. Stripping off my belt, with the knife in its elascoid sheath, I put it down beside the loaf.

"That was kindly," said Marna Murray, but I only half heard. From the dirt I picked up something—a bone.

It was a thigh bone, short and sturdy, and it had been cooked. The two of us studied it narrowly.

"Maybe they have domestic animals, too," said Marna Murray. "What kind? That bone doesn't match anything we've ever seen." Then, "I know why Wickram doesn't want us to meet the people on the hill."

"He'd prefer us to have nobody to associate with except each other," I suggested.

I hadn't, but now I did. Women like the legends—straight, strong, graceful, with flowing hair and brilliant eyes. "And you're thinking about the heroic Iron Age men," I teased back, as we headed away.

"I'm just thinking about people," said she. "They'd be friends—why not, Roper? They descended from our same stock. They'll be like us, except for education—even so, they'll have knowledge we don't. Each could give the other something."

She made them sound attractive, understandable, those people on the hills.

When we got back Wickram was outside, and found details that kept us busy the rest of the day. It passed quickly—we figured it twenty-four hours to one revolution, less than an eighteenth of a Venus day. "I'll take first watch tonight," said Wickram. "Quarters, you two. Murray takes over in three hours, and Roper gets the final watch until dawn."

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MY WATCH, at least, was so quiet as to be wearing. The moon came up, nearly full, making the sky pale around it. It lighted the sand, the distant sea, and in the other directions the distant hills. Fires were back on them, pointy flashes of light, and as the moon descended over that way I saw smokes. So, I said to myself, we've worried and daunted the Earth people into coming out at night only. Hefting my electro-automatic trifle. I realized they were right in thinking our strangeness a terror. Iron age versus electro-automatic age, space-ship age, was no contest.

At dawn the fires died again. Out looked Wickram, beckoning me in. From inside I watched him spray the blaze powder, then touch it into seried-color of flame. "Our second signal to Venus," he said. "Now others—not only one small craft like ours, but several, with something like a fair number—will take off. Our third and last blaze, before dawn tomorrow, will give them the reference point toward which to make way and join us."

Marna Murray, too, had seen the fires during the night. "I wonder about their language," she said as we emerged for the first meal. "Ours, as the speech experts have decided, has hardly changed in all the centuries—we talk substantially as our forbears did when they reached Venus, except for technical terms. Possibly those people up yonder could understand us, and we could understand them."

"Oh," said Wickram, slicing his loaf of synthetic, "you want to go talk to them."

"More than anything else in life!" cried Marna Murray, in outright hunger for the experience. "Let's do it."

"Let's do nothing of the sort, Murray," replied Wickram harshly. "We stay and hold on here, until our reenforcements arrive."

"Reenforcements," I repeated. "That sounds military. Like war."

"It might be just that," said Wickram, more harshly still. "Again, it mightn't. But we don't go to them, or near them, without being strong enough to finish anything they start. Make no mistake, you two. I was briefed thoroughly for what we hope to do here. Return to Earth means remastery of Earth, and no nonsense about it. Any terms made will be made by us. Understand? Any questions?"

Neither Marna Murray nor I asked any.

"Very well. Roper, you've just come off watch. You're allowed a rest period, sleep if you wish."

Obediently I went in to my quarters and lay down on the elasto-cot. After a while I slept, but not soundly, and not for long. When I woke up again, I washed and went to the lock-panel. I saw nobody for a moment, then Marna Murray strolled into view, rifle over her arm, on guard. She was alone, Wickram was away somewhere.

"Where's the Captain?" I asked her.

She nodded seaward. I looked, and saw a distant speck in the waters near shore. Wickram was swimming. Relaxing. And I welcomed the chance to talk to Marna Murray without his listening or watching. Marna, I saw in a moment, welcomed the chance, too.

"Captain Wickram is really all alone here," she said. "We—we're two more of his useful machines. A word operates us, instead of a touch-button or lever. We sometimes show hesitancy or slowness in doing our job—then there's a sharp word, like a solvent or lubricant, to get us efficient again. We're supposed to be good machines, Roper. Working machines, carrying machines—fighting machines, if so be he decides fighting must be done."

"It wouldn't be fighting," I said, looking up at the hills where the fires showed no more. "Just killing. Effortless, boresome killing."

"Have you ever wanted to kill anyone, Roper?"

I shook my head. "Once or twice I have thought of killing myself," I said, remembering the black hours after I'd heard that my girl wasn't my girl. "I know that's a crime, thinking such things, Murray. But I'm safe in telling you." And I knew that I was.

Her eyes were on the hills. "Of course," she said, "he'll find war—extermination—necessary. They aren't machines. They

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haven't been in the machine age yet, so they can't be. Inasmuch as they won't be machines, Wickram won't let them be men. He'll destroy them. If there are other communities, they'll perish, too."

"Will Wickram have the say-so?" I argued. "Higher command than he will be here pretty soon."

"But he'll have been here long enough to have formed a plan that the others will listen to. Roper, do you like being a machine?" She stared earnestly into my eyes. "You tried to protest once."

"No, I don't like being a machine. What else is there, in our particular culture?"

"It's not a natural culture," she said. "On Venus, we arrived as alien beings. We set up, and we have developed and followed, an unnatural culture. But here, we're back home. Home to mother—Mother Earth. We can be natural again, like those." She gestured largely toward the hills. "Roper, I'm not going to stay under Wickram's thumb, like a touch-button. I'm going up to those people."

"You'd dare that?"

"Why not? They're afraid of us. When I showed them they needn't be afraid, they'd be friends. Why not? They live naturally, happily. They grow their food, and it's delicious, a pleasure to eat. They warm themselves by fires they light and fuel naturally. They make their tools and shelters with their hands. They're not savages, and they're not machines either. I'm going to them."

She threw down her rifle and started. I moved after her. "Not going to take arms?"

"I don't want to arrive on such a basis," she insisted. But I ran back to our supplies, found and opened an arms-chest and took out two electro-automatic pistols. Running to catch up with her, I pushed one pistol into her hands."

"Keep this," I begged. "Keep it out of sight, if you want to, but keep it. If you never need it, so much the better."

She thrust it into her belt-pouch. "What I'm bringing," she said, "are the things really worth offering. Medicines. Chemical agents for tests and sterilizing work. A little book full of useful hints—cloth-weaving, well-digging, so on. Maybe I can teach them while they teach me. Roper, do you think you want to go along?"

I did want to go along. I was going along. But it wasn't so much leaving Wickram as staying with Marna Murray. We moved fast, yard after yard, furlong after furlong, putting distance between us and the supply base. When Wickram came back from his swim, we wanted to be beyond his sternly summoning voice.

We paused by the vegetable field. We looked for the knife and synthetic loaf, and they were gone. "See, Roper?" said Marna Murray. "They accepted our presents." She smiled over it. "Good will established, or started, anyway."

"We're going to be renegades," I reminded her. "Remember, when the others come, Wickram will tell them about that."

"All right, we'll be renegades. We'll also be patriots. People of Earth, not invaders. We'll make our friends understand their danger, make them ready to resist or retreat before it's too late."

She was full of plans and hope. So was I. We slogged away past the vegetables, and on over a level that was more heavily grassed in, toward the hills where we'd seen the fires.

"Roper, I'm glad you're coming with me," she said. "If it's to be war—and Wickram's going to make it war—I want you to be on the same side with me."

"I'm on the same side with you," I told her. As we walked along, we put out hands and touched, then clasped. Her hand was small, strong and warm.

EARTH, I thought as we trudged along, was older than Venus, a mature world and habituated and fit for full life. Venus, after all, was in the making, and not ready or hospitable as yet, even after all the centuries of grim, contrived human existence there. Almost as bad, perhaps, as worn-out, senile Mars. But Earth—we belonged here, Murray and I. We and our people should never have left. These other people had managed. They were better than we,

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because they'd stayed and seen it through, profited by mistakes.

They hadn't, I thought, failed to profit by the mistake of too much civilization. The iron age they lived in—it isn't as though they needed thousands upon thousands of years to work up to that. They'd achieved the iron age, out of the wreck of their former civilization after the war, and sensibly levelled off there. The iron age, the classic age—out of an iron age had come the Iliad, the Ten Commandments, the legends of the Round Table, a million good things that the machine age had no time to emulate or even imitate.

We were at the foot of the hills. We had passed a couple of other vegetable fields, and at one of them we had stopped and plucked vegetables, eating them raw and tasty for the noon meal. Now it was afternoon, and the grounded space ship far away toward the sea was only a tiny dull-glowing thumb of metal. Wickram, if he were there, would be too small to see. We didn't look for him. We started to climb the nearest and lowest hill, and after a while we found a worn, hard-tramped trail that led us knowledgeably up in the best way. We topped the hill, and there was nothing but the trail down the other side, across a little dip, and up the larger hill beyond, toward the summit of the saw-toothed range.

"The first thing to do," said Marna Murray, who seemed to be giving us the orders, but gentle, pleasant orders, none of Wickram's sharp-and-no-nonsense style, "is to build their fires for them. Show that they can have fires by daylight, like honest, natural people. After that, see if they can understand us."

I did touch my pistol, stuck down in the waistband of my elascoid trousers, but I felt guilty at mistrusting our new friends in advance. For a moment I wondered if some of them—sages or mystics—might not be able to read minds, and would distrust people who came smiling among them with concealed weapons. I contemplated throwing the gun away, but I didn't. We went downhill along the trail, and then uphill, uphill for nearly an hour. It was a high hill, several hundred feet as I judged, not difficult climbing in any single point, but sustained effort. We were both panting a little when we came to the top.

The top levelled off, and there were rocks around us, big ones singly and smaller ones in heaps, nowhere higher than my head. No people, and no sign of them, except a mark of black cinders and gray ashes where a fire had been, and a stack of wood, some of it broken into lengths, some of it chopped into lengths.

"They've seen us coming!" cried Marna Murray in self-accusation. "They've run away from their own fireplace."

And there was a tear in her eye, caught by the last gleam of the sinking sun. We'd been all day making the journey.

"If they've retreated, we can hardly follow them as it gets darker," I said, feeling let down, the way she did. "Let's eat. I brought provisions."

"But first," said Marna Murray, "let's build up their fire for them. "Build it up big and bright and cheerful. Maybe they'll see it, and think that some of their party is here, and is signalling for them to come back."

"How do you build a fire?" I asked, for I didn't know. I'd never had a fire to build in all my life on Venus, where everything is touch-button and lever-switch.

"You find out," said Marna Murray, and laughed at me.

We had a time of it. Our first two attempts were failures. Then I came back a bit from the iron age, producing a pellet from the electro-automatic magazine, laying it on a flat piece of wood and carefully crushing down with another. It burst into explosive flame, of course, and Marna Murray was ready with other bits of wood. That start was soon able to take care of anything we cared to give it. It mastered sticks and chunks of fuel, smouldering up and then darting up tongues of flame that crackled and rattled. The darkness was settling and thickening in around us, but that fire of ours drove it back with vigorous driving strokes of rich red light. All at once I understood the ancient enthusiasms,

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as expressed in classic poetry, for the open wood fire. It meant comfort, protection, comradeship, rest, relaxation, jollity.

"They'll certainly see that," prophesied Marna Murray. "They'll see it, and understand."

She sat down, cross-legged, and beamed at me. I beamed back at her. I was glad of her company. I was almost sorry for Wickram, without his two subordinate human beings to carry out his orders and make him feel commanding and masterful. I broke out rations, and we divided them, Marna Murray and I. We found them delicious. We relaxed. For a little while we forgot what we were there for—I, at least, didn't care whether the settlers on the hill came back to us or not. Marna Murray sang a little. After a time she said, "Look over on the next hill, Simon."

She hadn't called me Roper. I looked, and I saw another fire over there.

"It must be a sort of a signal back to us," said Marna Murray. "But they're still shy and timid, aren't they?"

"They seem to be staying away," I agreed, and at that moment there was a sort of harsh, creaky rustling. We both looked in that direction. A long, slender body lifted itself, within the outer ring of the firelight.

"A man!" cried Marna Murray.

But it wasn't a man.

THE body was a long one, rusty pink and bald looking. A head was set on top of it without benefit of neck, and short, crooked arms moored to either side without benefit of shoulders. It would have been as tall as I am if the legs hadn't been short and crooked, too. The thing's height was mostly body, and it stood, perhaps, as tall as my armpit. The head was round, and in the firelight gleamed its two eyes, cold green. Its mouth was open and toothy, and out of the mouth came the creaky rustling sound.

I jumped up from where I'd been sitting beside Marna Murray. At that another creaky rustling sound broke out behind me, in answer to the first, and other long-bodied things came slinking in from all around us.

"Look out, Marna," I said softly, and set my hand on the butt of the gun. "They—"

They looked like rats, I thought. I saw that the round heads had upcocked wide ears and sharp, front-jutting muzzles and no chins at all. The only hair on them seemed to be bristly mustache whiskers, fanning out to either side. There were a dozen of them ringed around us, and more slipping into sight from openings under the rock-piles. They seemed to move on all fours or upright with equal readiness. They were closing in the circle they'd drawn around our fire. Once or twice a big one chattered, and seemed to be directing the others.

I thought of rats because I knew what rats looked like. Rats were the only animals, other than selected domestic species, that had made the space-ship jump from Earth to Venus in the old days, and they had bred, developed and multiplied there, shrewd, rugged and stubborn. Where some of the domestic types had died out completely, and the others become weak, scarce strains, the rats had made good on Venus.

Marna Murray had the same thought. I heard her say, "Rats," in a horror-hushed voice, as they closed in.

I drew my gun and pointed it, at the biggest of the creatures, but I reckoned without some of his companions. They were upon me so fast that it was like being hit by huge, flying raindrops—filthy raindrops, that smelled like sweat and spoiled meat. A pair of arms grabbed my right arm, sharp nails dug through my elascoid sleeve. Another weight fastened itself to my back, another around my legs. Down I went in a heap.

Marna Murray screamed, and rushed. Her gun was out, too, and working. She poured explosive pellets into the creatures that swarmed over me, knocking them loose from me. One, another, a third—and then her gun worked no more. She'd squeezed down the trigger and fired charge after charge until they were all gone. Next moment, they had her, too.

"Simon!" she called out to her only friend on that whole world, and I tried to

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struggle free and help her. Next moment I was hit somewhere on the head, and the firelight faded from in front of my eyes.

I wakened to find myself bound tightly. Whoever had tied me up knew the tie-up business. Not only my arms and legs, but my neck and heels and thumbs and toes were lashed and swathed with lines. I lay with my back against a big stone, and in the light of the fire I saw Marna, also tied and helpless, against another stone facing me. Her hair was mussed into a tangle, her jersey and slacks were torn, and her eyes were wide and blank.

"Marna," I said.

"Hello, Simon," she said back. All around us sounded the rustling voices of our captors. "We were wrong, weren't we? About these lords and masters of Mother Earth."

"What are they?" I asked, because wonder and mystery dominated every other matter in my mind.

"Rats," said Marna. "I've studied evolution, Simon. You know about the rays and split atoms and such things turned loose in that destroying war? Radiation can make changes in adaptations and tendencies of creatures. Whatever was to live through the catastrophe would be altered into the sort of monster that could survive. Rats—what else are these things?"

"But they act like men—" I said.

"They've developed. The changes the war made in the world's condition, and the meeting of necessity by nature. And what humanity left behind it—gardens, tools—"

That was all we had time to say. They saw we were awake, and they came about us again. Some crouched as they moved, others craned over the shoulders of the crouchers. I was stunned and nauseated by their ring of sharp muzzles and glowing eyes, and the smell of them, which I can't describe in any terms. They were snickering and chattering to each other.

"What will they do to us?" quavered Marna.

I was making a guess to myself about that. A couple of them were building a fire. It was skilfully built, that fire—they knew how to build on, as I didn't. First a handful of small, dry twigs, then some short pieces of thicker wood, and then a sort of criss-cross of stubby pieces that would make a hot, concentrated blaze, like a—

"Cooking fire," breathed Marna, almost too softly for me to catch.

When the fire was going, the two who had made it conferred in their snickering language. One of them reached out his claw-fringed paw, and a neighbor put a knife into it, the knife I had left for a present at the vegetable field. I saw the paw close around the handle of the knife. It was only a paw, with no thumb or anything that served for a thumb—clumsy, in a way, but skilful in another, with a palm all gray-pallid where the skin of the back, like the skin of the rest of the creature, was rusty pink. The creature tested the point of his knife on the palm of the other paw. He took hold of the knife point, and appeared to be delighted with the way the blade curved and sprung. Then he moved toward Marna, and bent above her and lifted the knife.

Just then a bright little glow showed in his side, like the striking of an electro-automatic pellet, and he spun around and dropped into slack stillness.

You should have heard the skirling and rattling chorus of their voices. The other fire-maker—it was a female, maybe the two fire-makers were mates—ran to the body and stooped to touch it. A glow exploded in the center of her low, back-slanting forehead, brighter than the fire, and she slumped across the first to fall.

The others began to mill and howl. One of the biggest pointed to me, and a louder howl went up. Several made at me, as if they thought I'd struck down their friends. I hadn't, I couldn't—I was tied like a package. I couldn't defend myself if they tried to do anything, and they were going to try. The nearest of them flashed out his talon-fringed paws, and then I heard the solid *plop* of a striking missile. He was down. Another was down, another. The night was torn and riven with the screaming of their many voices.

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They didn't understand. Death had come among them. It struck them down at every movement they made toward us. All that was comprehensible about that destruction was that it came to defend us. They shrank away, all but one that might have been a chief. He was plucky, I'll give him that. He stooped and picked up the fallen dagger.

What he was going to do with it we could never tell, for his paw burst into ruddy explosion as an electro-automatic pellet struck it. And before he had the chance to look down and see what made him drop the knife, another explosion bloomed in the center of his breast and dropped him like a chunk of mud.

That was enough for the others. They turned and ran in all directions. As some of them ran in one direction by chance, they wilted and tumbled dead, and the others went the opposite way. They pulled out of there, off of the hill. We stayed alone, bound and helpless as we were; we had to stay alone, with the fire that had been stoked up to cook us, and the corpses of those horrid unguessable creatures that had been about to have a bite of us.

We were motionless and silent for what seemed hours, but was probably minutes. Then feet came scampering into hearing, and a dark, tall figure popped into view. Wickram was there, rifle in one hand, his dagger in the other, cutting our bonds.

"YOU fools," Wickram said to us, without heat, only contempt. "You two star-gazing, dream-driven fools. Lie quiet, Roper, so that I can cut you loose. Nothing would do but the best, eh? You wanted a paradise on this Earth, and you thought you'd get what you wanted."

"Get Marna out of this," I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "Get her out—don't mind me—"

"I've already set her free," said Wickram, "but it's informing to hear you talk like that about her. The bureau boys who tried to get you together knew what they were doing, after all."

He stooped and picked up my fallen pistol, then Marna's. "Here you are. They let the things stay where you dropped them. Load up again, Marna." He paused and stooped down to examine one of the bodies. "Amazing. Yet, once you accept the idea, quite logical. The race of the rats was bound to come through even the worst of catastrophes, and develop—next to humanity, rats are perhaps best fitted to conquer and rule—"

"How did you get here?" I asked him.

"Followed you two deserters, of course. As it got to be dusk, I lost sight of your tracks, and went up a trail to another hilltop where there weren't any of these rat folk. From there I saw what was happening on this hill, by the firelight. I had a telescopic finder-sight on my rifle," and he held it out to us. "I could pick them off as I pleased, and I injected a little drama into it for their benefit. Let them fall as if fate had overtaken them. In a way, fate had—in my person. Simple, eh?"

Simple, yes, when Wickram was there to do it. He motioned to us.

"Back home we go. That bunch of gentry was startled away from you, but they'll get up their courage and come back. Head down the hill, Roper, and keep your eyes open and your pistol ready. Then you, Murray. I'll bring up the rear."

We departed from the hill in the order he had set up. And Wickram had been right. I suppose that rats, who hadn't come down to us as traditionally courageous except when cornered, had developed their resolution during those centuries as lords of creation. We could hear them skirling and chattering to each other. As we made it through the darkness to the top of the next hill, with the level land beyond, the moon came up. By its light, we saw distant figures fringing the heights we had left. Wickram lifted his rifle, but did not touch the trigger.

"No, let them come a little closer," he said. "Close enough to feel they threaten our escape. Then when a few of them die, it'll look like a fairly explicit warning. We can't kill them all, and the ones who are still alive must learn to be afraid of us."

"Of us three human beings!" cried

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Marna incredulously, looking back. There were hundreds of the rat folk.

"Of us three human beings," agreed Wickram bleakly. "We've got to hold them off until more of us arrive to take care of them. This isn't the sort of recognizable war we could fight with other men. We can't make compromises or treaties—we must wipe them out, or be wiped out ourselves."

We reached the level ground, and moved away with what speed we could make toward the distant point where our ship was located.

It wasn't a straight journey, nor a quiet one.

The rat folk came down out of the hills behind us, though they did not try to press us any too close. They didn't feel they had to, because of what we were to find up ahead, at the vegetable patches.

Moving in advance of the others, I found it first. It was heralded by something that sang shrilly past my ear, a missile. I heard Wickram grunt behind me, the missile had hit him. Then, moving toward us in the gloom, came a skirmish line of rat folk.

One of them lifted his paw, with something in it. I aimed by guess in the darkness, and my pellet struck and lighted up his sharp, low-browed face with its explosion. Marna fired, almost over my shoulder, and knocked down another. I aimed at a third, a fourth, and both my shots told. The creatures wavered before us, retreated and at the same time bunched together. They seemed to sink into the ground, like wisps of heavy vapor.

"Rush them," Wickram was commanding. He sounded as if he had clenched his teeth. Marna and I obeyed, in time to see a sort of trapdoor closing down on a hole. So the rat folk had dens, cleverly disguised, near their vegetable patches, and stayed in them during the daylight—that solved the mystery that had perplexed Wickram and me the day before. I prodded the place with my foot. It sounded hollow when I stamped, but I couldn't make out any way to open it.

"Let me," said Wickram, coming up. He lowered the muzzle of his rifle and let it spit a burst of pellets. They glowed and exploded in the soil, and the hole made itself visible. Thrusting his weapon down more closely into this opening, Wickram poured a longer, more concentrated series of shots into it. We heard a sudden chorus of chattering screams, which abruptly ceased.

"They'll not be any advance guard to press our retreat," said Wickram, and staggered a little.

"You're hurt," said Marna.

"Whatever that cursed beast threw nicked my arm—not deeply, but it made me feel faint."

I PICKED up something from beside the corpse I had first struck. It was a simple piece of wood, shaped like an L. In the shorter arm was a socket, and in the socket a short, heavy dart which was equipped with a metal tip.

"Like the old throwing sticks of ancient savages," said Marna. "A skilful user can double the force of his cast with it. Let's look at your wound, Captain."

She turned on a radium flash. Wickram's sleeve was torn, and blood streaked it, but the wound on his forearm was, as he had said, no more than a nick.

"On to our base," he scolded. "I'm no weakling to be fussed over."

We kept moving, though not very fast. Once or twice Wickram called out harshly for us to slow down. Back beyond him we had the awareness, though none too clear a view, of those rat folk, coming after us in a large and fairly well controlled formation. They kept their distance, but not too furtively. It was as if they were coming along to watch something.

Which is exactly what they were coming along to do.

Those of them that had popped up at the vegetable patch might have warned us, but Marna and I weren't mental like Wickram, and Wickram was suffering with that superficial but painful wound. We moved closer to our base and closer. It took several hours, and dawn was pretty nearly arrived as we came up and in a few more

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moments would have headed in and been lost.

But Wickram stopped and reeled a little. Marna sprang back to him and steadied him by his elbow, and he cried out in pain.

"What is it?" I demanded. "Your wound?"

Marna turned on her flash, and we saw that his hand, wrist and forearm were swelled up like a loaf of synthetic, all angry red except at the wound. That was black.

"All right," said Wickram, still between his clenched teeth. "I didn't want to drive you two into hysterics. That dart that grazed me a little while ago was poisoned. Clever little hunting creatures, aren't they?"

"We've got to get to the ship," said Marna. "There'll be medicines—counter-agents—"

"After all these hours," said Wickram, and now he sounded just weary and gentle, "I doubt if they'll help. Roper, I don't know if you have any seniority over Murray, but when I'm done for you'll command here. I think, all things being equal, a man's a better commander than a woman."

"Get him to the ship," Murray said to me, and we turned that way. But there was a rising flicker of sound from there, and when we looked hard in the moonlight we saw that all around our ship swarmed rat folk.

"We're trapped between two forces," said Marna, and her voice was quiet but too frightened to be desperate. "They've got us."

"No, we've got them," Wickram snarled. "You two pull out and move sidewise, between the two parties, and get away toward the ocean. Let me go forward alone."

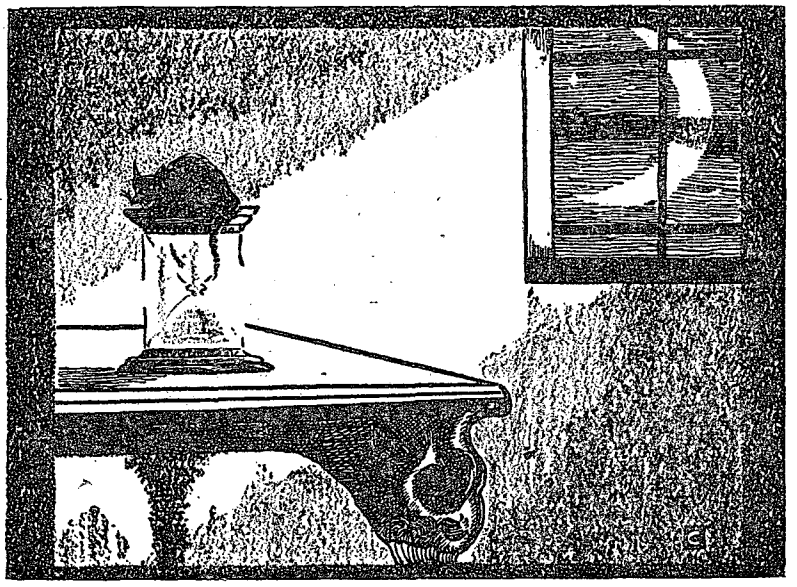
"Captain, I won't—" I began.

"You'll obey orders, Roper," he informed me in a burst of rage. "Move fast, and take Marna with you. If you follow me, or even try to follow me, I'll let you have a couple of rounds from this rifle. I mean it. Start out!"

He pulled himself together, and fairly ran toward the ship.

We paused and watched. To that extent, we disobeyed the last order he ever gave us.

The rat folk seemed to be trying to get the door of the ship open, but they paused and looked as Wickram approached. I saw him once, in a clear flash of moonlight—he had the rifle at his good shoulder, his good hand on the trigger, but the muzzle drooping toward the ground. As he came at them, I could hear the whiz of darts in the air. Probably Wickram was hit once or



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twice, because he faltered, but did not slacken his pace. He came quite close to the ship, when they spread out and moved in again, as if to surround him. Then he pulled the trigger, and the pellet struck the ground in a red glow of explosion.

All the ground around the ship was lurid fire, the color of blood—then blue, green, pale yellow, red again.

Wickram must have spread his blaze signal powder for the third and final before dawn signal before he went after us.

It was blinding, that field of changing, glaring flame, sprouting up in an area all around the ship for moment after moment. When it died again, Marna and I were blinded. We held our eyes in our hands until we could look again for Wickram and the rat folk.

There wasn't any Wickram, and there weren't any rat folk.

THE blaze powder had whiffed them all out of existence together, every molecule of them. Wickram, with death upon him, had managed to destroy all those dozens of enemies who had closed in on him.

I yelled like an animal myself, and ran toward the place. Marna was behind me. I realized that the other rat-party was following, more slowly, and quite silent. At the edge of the smoking area where the blaze signal had gone off, taking with it so many living creatures, I turned and fired into the foremost ranks of the rat folk.

They stopped still, and they fell. For one crazy instant I imagined that my single pistol shot had stricken them all dead. Then, in the moonlight, I saw that I hadn't. They were alive, all right, but they were lying on their faces. They began to make sounds, not trills and snickers, but moans. Prone and helpless-looking, they stretched out their paws to us. One of them raised his ugly pointed face, and then shoved it back down in the sand.

I moved toward them, not caring whether I lived another second. They moaned and tried to crawl away, backwards, their faces down, their bodies horizontal. They looked as if they were praying.

That was it, they were praying. They'd seen a more unthinkable and terrible destruction of their fellow-beings than the one Wickram had wrought with long-range rifle fire on the hilltop. What had he said about it? *The ones who are still alive must learn to be afraid of us.* Well, that had come to them. Fear. They had seen a single strange invader, surrounded and doomed by overwhelming numbers, simply take himself away in a fountain of many-colored fires, and with him had gone every soul that had offered him any violence.

They were beaten. They crawled, they moaned. They pulled out of there. Marna and I watched them going, and then, very suddenly, she fainted.

We waited outside for the dawn, and waited all the next day, and the next night. In the morning that followed, we found things brought close to our base. Stacks of vegetables, neatly arranged—carrots, turnips, cabbages, beans. On top of the pile lay something we recognized, the belt and knife I had left for them to take three nights before.

"They want to make peace with us," said Marna. "Bribe us. Buy us off."

"It's a sort of pity they can't," I replied. "I don't comprehend peace with them. It's us or them, Marna. If they don't come at us again, we'll go after them."

"When our reenforcements arrive, Simon." She looked at me. "Until then, you and I are the only realities."

"You're reality enough for me, Marna."

"And you for me."

We stopped talking, because we had something more important to do for the moment. When Marna took her face away from mine, she said, "You ought to shave. Simon, there will have to be a report of all this."

"When the others arrive, and I have time, I'll write one," I said.

Now that they're arriving, I have written it.

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Two Face

BY FRANK BELKNAP LONG

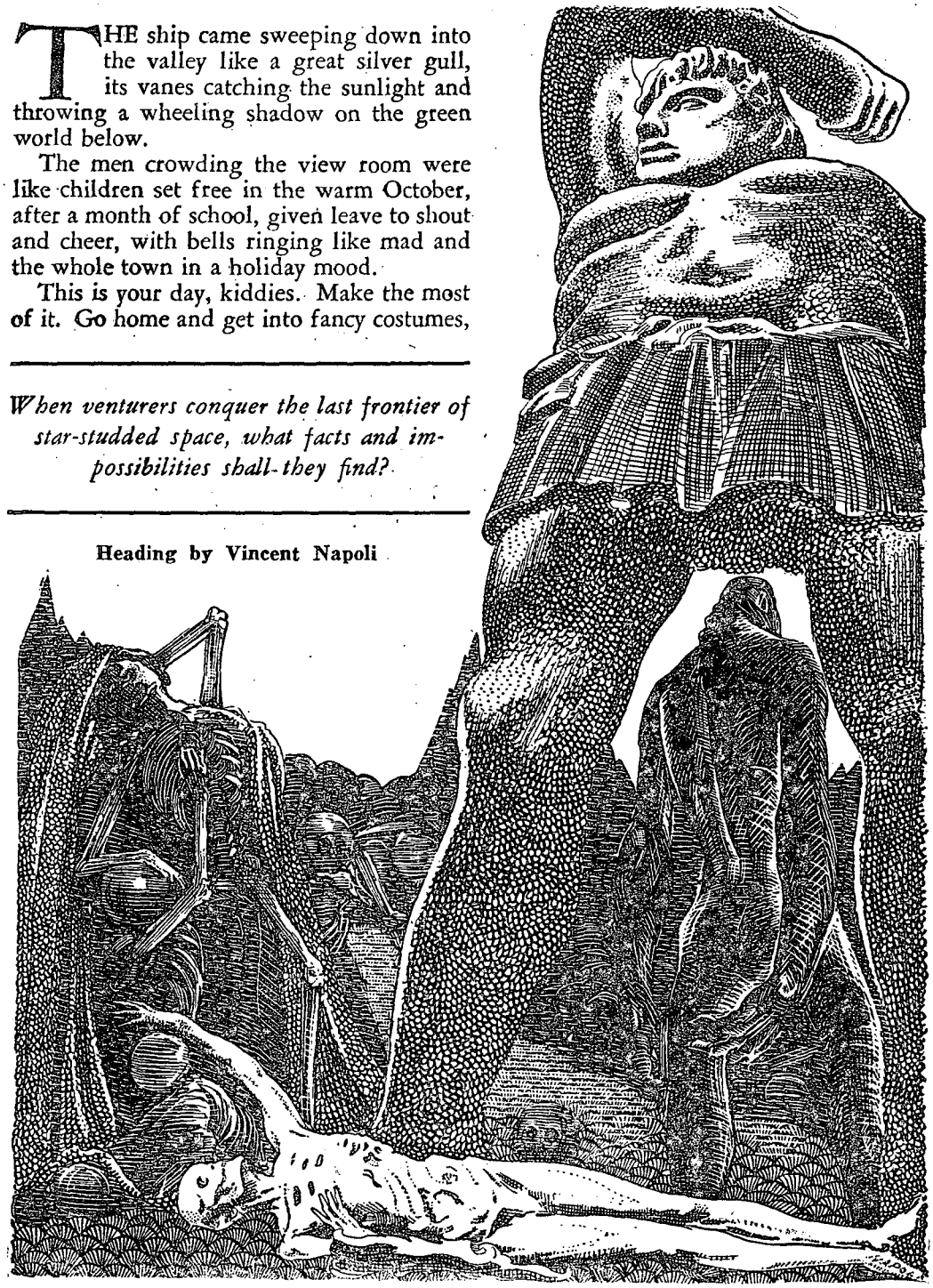
THE ship came sweeping down into the valley like a great silver gull, its vanes catching the sunlight and throwing a wheeling shadow on the green world below.

The men crowding the view room were like children set free in the warm October, after a month of school, given leave to shout and cheer, with bells ringing like mad and the whole town in a holiday mood.

This is your day, kiddies. Make the most of it. Go home and get into fancy costumes,

When venturers conquer the last frontier of star-studded space, what facts and impossibilities shall they find?

Heading by Vincent Napoli



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break open packages of colored chalk, cut eye-holes in pumpkins, race up and down stairs dressed up for Hallowe'en, Thanksgiving, Christmas.

The men crowding the view room felt sweat break out on their necks and hands. They were not altogether convinced that the green world was real.

How could a man ever be sure that the great day was real? The torturing anticipation, the high-soaring hopes and fears, the travail, the weariness, the discipline of long days and nights in star-dusty space could give birth to strange doubts which even the shimmer of sunlight on a green valley could not dispel.

How could one be sure when the sun was not Sol, but Alpha of the Centaurs, and the green world was not Mars or Venus, but the warmest of little inner planets swimming in a dreamed of tomorrow that had suddenly become today.

Today, now, this instant, as the great ship circled and wheeled, its shadow lengthening on the walls of the green ravine.

"Steady as she goes!" Captain Paul Hendry called out, his shoulders held straight in the port gleam, a dawning wonder in his stare.

Equally eager and straight stood John Hoskins, meteorologist, a little man with keen hawk eyes, and Fred Allison, a man of strength and girth and a Gargantuan appetite for the good things of life. Jim Miles, still pale from his museum chores on Earth, had lost a leg in World War IV, and it was a little difficult for him to stand as straight as the others. But his eyes were as eager, his lips as tight.

Each of the dozen men stood straight in his own way, some with a straightness of the spirit, and others with a straightness of the body, and a few with a straightness that was simply a relief from anxiety, from the fact of fear.

As the men watched the valley sweep up, widening and deepening, a bulkhead panel swung open, and a slim girl came into the view room. She had tawny hair and clear blue eyes.

The men turned and by a curious quirk of identification their minds placed the valley glow about the head of the girl, and by a curious quirk of sympathy they transferred their own emotions to the lucky fellow who stepped forward to take her in his arms.

It was inevitable that Allison should be the lucky one, for Barbara Maitland, archaeologist, she of the shining skills and tight-braided hair, preferred strength and confidence to caution in a man.

"It's good to know this belongs to everybody!" the girl breathed. "We've crossed space to another star and we've proved that it could be done, and now it belongs to every man, woman and child on Earth. We mustn't ever allow ourselves to forget that!"

"Not a chance!" Allison laughed, holding her in a tight, waltzing embrace. "We'll go on from here! This is just a beginning!"

Around and around they waltzed, while the men grinned, cheered, shouted, wept. Captain Hendry brought his fist down on his palm with a resounding smack and said: "Break it up, lads! Save the fireworks until we've set her down!"

THE ship came to rest on a sloping green hillside, with hardly a tremor, and Captain Hendry busied himself with the duties peculiar to his command and the experts went to work and long-nourished fears, doubts and trepidations vanished like tallow in bright sunlight as the good news spread through the ship.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once.

"The air is just right, sir! A little high in oxygen content, but we can take the excess in our stride, sir!"

"The temperature is just dandy, sir. Couldn't be better. Sixty-five in the shade!"

"We won't need spacesuits, sir! We can go outside whenever you give the word!"

Just give the wonderful, bright, shining word and we'll all go outside and scoop up handfuls of the new earth, and breathe the new air deep into our lungs and flash the great news back to Earth on a radio with a range of light years. Just give the word, sir!

Captain Hendry gestured for silence and called for three volunteers. The first man to step forward was Fred Allison, with a quick intake of his breath. Jim Miles wet his lips

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and reached Allison's side in two limping strides, a little ahead of Hoskins, who moved with the deliberation of a scientist refusing to be rushed.

"Now then, men!" Captain Hendry said, his eyes flashing. "We'll just go down into the valley and have a look around. I've a great deal of respect for the captain who marched all of his men down a hill and marched them straight back again. He had a fine flair for the dramatic. He should also have been handed over to a lunacy commission!"

"We'd all like to go outside, sir!" a foolish lad protested. "We really would, sir!"

"You'll get your chance!" Hendry laughed. "We'll be here a long time."

Without further ado Captain Hendry swung about and walked toward the gravity lock. Allison, Miles and Hoskins fell into step at his heels, feeling suddenly organized and confident, ready to follow the captain to the ends of the earth. For surely this was an earth, even if it were not Terra. Just as warm and friendly, just as green, just as ripe for exploration.

The air was cool and sweet, good to breathe, and as the gravity lock closed with a gentle murmur the four men stood for an instant directly in front of the ship, stood utterly motionless with a shivering wonder in their thoughts, drinking in the fresh new vista. Then they swung about and went striding down into the valley, walking four abreast, compact little energy weapons jogging on their hips.

On such a mission Captain Hendry had no desire to take the lead. Share and share alike, in danger and glory, and let each man be a captain in his own right.

EXPLORING a new world was like pouring a generous measure of champagne into a glass and watching the bubbles collect in frosty beads. You had to be a little careful about drinking the champagne. Like as not it would be bad for you. The pouring was the thing, savoring the aroma of a new world, watching the bubbles sparkle and dance.

Green grass under their feet, a caressing wind on their cheeks and the valley sloping away to a misty glimmering. The valley widening out and each of the four thinking: This is it! This is the great day and we are the first! This is our moment to bequeath to our children's children, this is our fine, bright, new gift to the world of tomorrow!

They were a thousand feet below the ship when the thin mist rolled back and the glimmering heart of the valley swept into their view.

Captain Hendry stopped walking, the beauty and wonder crashing about him like a shattering house of glass. Miles cried out hoarsely, and let fear and revulsion sweep him, making no effort to conceal the way he felt.

"Look! Oh, look!" Hoskins muttered, pointing, a spasm twisting the muscles of his throat.

Only Allison took the sight in his stride. Only Allison stood up to it, throwing out his arms in a gesture of defiance and fierce human pride, throwing his arms out and back as if to embrace that incredible challenge to humanity and hold it in a crushing hammerlock.

In the still green depths of the valley a great stone figure loomed. Titanic in girth, aureoled in radiance, it straddled the valley with a terrible, possessive strength.

The colossus was a brutish parody of the human figure as evolution had shaped that figure on Earth. It was apelike and yet not quite an ape, manlike but in no sense a true man. The barrel chest, the long, dangling arms, and the bared teeth were wholly simian. But the cranial bulge above the massive eye sockets was more pronounced than the brain bulge of Homo sapiens, and the long, apelike arms terminated in slender-fingered hands, white and almost feminine in their delicacy.

The stone giant was staring straight up the valley slope, its brutish arms outspread, its malign, heavy-jowled face flashing glints of sunlight into the eyes of the staring men from Earth. Briefly and fantastically the sunlight flitted over the bulging eyeballs of the brute, etching blue shadows into the sunken cheeks, filling the mouth with fire.

The colossus was still with the stillness of a carven gargoyle crouching on some

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cathedral fastness in an age of blood and strife.

"If that statue is an idol it would debase the most primitive cult of cannibals on Earth!" Hoskins choked.

"Yes, you are right, Hoskins!" Captain Hendry agreed. "It sickens me just to look at it. We'd better go back!"

"Go back!" Allison stood against the glare, facing the valley slope. "You can't be serious, sir! It took genius to carve a figure like that out of solid rock! It's the greatest of all great stone faces! More than a face, a complete humanoid shape! This planet is inhabited by craftsmen, by heaven!"

"Craftsmen?" Hendry muttered. "Craftsmen, did you say? You mean barbarians with a terrible, naked hatred of life! A love of cruelty and death. Just look at that face. Let its expression sink into you, man! If you give it half a chance—it will remold your brain to fit the way it feels about you!"

Allison threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"It seems to amuse you, Allison!" Hendry said.

ALLISON turned with a defiant shrug. "If that's the kind of idol they prefer to worship—it's their funeral, not ours! We carry powerful weapons. We can take care of ourselves. Let's not be childish about this."

Captain Hendry turned and put his hand on Miles' shoulder. "What do you think, Jim? Shall we go back?"

Miles shut his eyes before replying. In his mind's gaze he saw Barbara Maitland standing by the view port, framed against the stellar night, her hair a tawny web of glory.

He remembered how she talked, laughed, sat, walked. In his thoughts he reached out and took her into his arms. In his thoughts she broke away from him, mocking him with her healthy straight young body. How could she love a man who limped, who seldom smiled, who was wedded by temperament to cold precision instruments and the dry dust of museums?

What did it matter that they had been childhood sweethearts, when choking dry dust now rose like a cloud between them.

A reckless young cub, Allison. Untamed and callow, a lion cub in his cruel playfulness. As ready to slap a woman as to love her, trading on his bronzed, first-youth boyishness, his winning smile. What incredible fools women were to be taken in by rippling muscles and the thinly disguised ugliness of an outsized human brute masquerading as a laughing Apollo.

Just how much happiness would Barbara lose if the lion cub went down alone into the valley and never came back? Not much, surely.

No woman could be happy for long in a lion cub's playful embrace.

"Well, Jim, what do you say?" Captain Hendry urged.

Jim turned with a shudder of self-loathing. "Allison has made up his mind, sir," he said. "We can't let him go alone."

"I can order him back!" Hendry protested. "What do you think this is, a debating society?"

"No, sir. But if you order Allison back he'll refuse to obey. You'll have to discipline him."

"Say what you mean, man!" Hendry flared. "You mean I'll have to blast him down."

"That's correct, sir."

Hendry reddened. "Are you suggesting that I allow him to flaunt discipline?"

Miles shook his head. "No, sir. If you order him back and he refuses everlasting regret will walk with us. Why give him a chance to flaunt discipline, sir? You can untie your hands by killing him. But wouldn't it be simpler to go along with him? How about it?"

Deeper in the valley the Captain fell to arguing again. "I was crazy to listen to you, Jim," he said.

Miles frowned, jogging on. The colossus loomed above them and the valley sloped away and the hot sunlight beat down. Allison had fallen back, to join the others. Another minute and Captain Hendry would have forgotten his anger, would have accepted him again as a comrade in arms. But that minute never came.

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THERE was no time for further talk, a shifting of perspective, the satisfying realization that discipline on a new world was less important than Captain Hendry had dreamed.

For the valley was suddenly swarming with living men and women, tawny-skinned and lithe of limb, wearing primitive garments of some rough cloth and carrying themselves with the natural, easy grace of barbarians everywhere.

They came swarming up the slope, shouting and laughing, straight toward the four men from Earth. A sing-song kind of speech they had. It certainly wasn't Chinese, but it was good to hear, warm and rich and vibrant.

"Don't let them come too close!" Hendry warned, his hand darting to his hip.

It was a needless warning. For when the laughing barbarians came close fear went away. Uneasiness and suspicion went away.

Allison burst out laughing. "They're like children!" he said, laughing very hard. "Friendly children."

"Yes!" Hoskins agreed.

Miles said nothing. He simply stood still and accepted the warm tribute of friendliness in stunned disbelief. An incredible outflowing of pure good will it was, a thing that could be instantly sensed. The men came up and patted the four men from Earth on the shoulder. With gratitude in their eyes, with appreciation and respect and loyalty and hometown pride, as though they were greeting football heroes at the end of a great game.

A truly great game! It was a heartier greeting than any handshake, a thing of wild enthusiasm. It was like being lifted on the shoulders of a cheering crowd.

The women were more circumspect. They simply knelt and embraced the feet of the men from Earth.

The friendly people. Ah, how friendly they were, how incredibly kind. Kneeling at Allison's feet a sloe-eyed woman crooned to him in tender rapture as Captain Hendry paced slowly back and forth. Had an hour passed or an eternity?

Of course, it wasn't real. Of course they were all dreaming, and this couldn't be real. In a moment it would crash and dissolve, splinter and whip away, like a great ship ripped asunder by a collision in space, floundering in the black gulfs and throwing out pinwheeling splashes of light as it shattered into dust.

The four men from Earth were in a lush green valley with a high windy cave behind them. They were being slowly suffocated with friendliness. It was impossible for them to break away.

Miles felt a vague uneasiness as Hendry paced, a desire to talk to Hendry. He stood up and walked slowly to the captain's side, and joined him in his pacing.

"This is incredible!" he said.

"Quite!" Hendry agreed.

"We ought to be getting back to the ship, sir!"

"All in good time!" Hendry said.

"You're not resigned to staying here, sir?"

"What do you take me for?" Hendry stopped pacing to glare at Miles. "We'll be getting back soon enough."

"But blast it, sir, why don't we go immediately?"

"Because I don't want to antagonize these people!" Hendry blurted out. "We've got to live with them. Another planet of another star—inhabited by a really friendly race of human beings. Do you realize what that means, Jim?"

"It has been making my head spin!" Miles acknowledged. "They're not at all like us, sir."

"I know, Jim."

"There's no suspicion, no malice in them. Where are all the instinctive tribal antagonisms you'd expect to find in a barbarian culture? We're strangers here, outsiders. But that doesn't mean a thing to them!"

"I know, I know!" Hendry muttered, looking concerned. "There's something horribly wrong here, but I can't put my finger on it."

"Wrong? You don't like it? Look here, sir. This friendliness is the real thing. It's genuine, deep-seated. Don't ask me how I know but I do know, sir. I can feel it in my bones!"

"So can I!" Hendry conceded. "And I

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still don't like it. It's not natural, it's not—well, human."

HENDRY raised his eyes and stared at Allison. The big man sat on a boulder, with a barbarian maid on each of his sun-bronzed knees. Another girl crouched at his feet, staring up at him with the rapt absorption of an Indian basket maker. Ensnaring him in a warm and friendly way, but not at all possessively.

"They're just naturally free of guile, sir!" Miles commented. "Simple and generous and kind. They don't even hate one another!"

"I'm not blind," Hendry grunted. "Sex antagonism is pretty basic with us. Just about rock bottom basic. Those girls aren't even jealous."

Hendry turned as he spoke, and contemplated Hoskins. Hoskins was doing an incredible thing. He was engaging in athletic competition. The friendly people were disc throwers.

Before the cave three tall native strong boys were hurling flat wooden discs at a distant stage. The discs were perforated, and the game was quite obviously a far Centaurian variant of an old rustic game which still survived on Earth.

The first disc thrower missed the stake by a good two yards. As he grimaced and groaned another strong boy came closer. The skillfully hurled disc of number three grazed the stake with a vibrant twang. Hoskins made a ringer!

It was an incredible feat, for the punched-out center of the disc barely fitted the stake. The three strong boys surrounded Hoskins and lifted him to their shoulders. They pranced around with him in a wild fury of acclaim.

"We can be good losers, too!" Miles breathed quickly.

One of the barbarian girls came up to Hoskins and locked her arms about his neck.

The three strong boys drew away and grinned at Hoskins. Hoskins flushed guiltily and straightened a little, as if anticipating trouble. But the strong boys continued to grin. Their expressions said as plain as words: "You're a better man than we are, Gunga Din! That young lady is just about the cutest trick on this planet. But you've won her honestly, in fair competition. Compared to you we just don't rate!"

It was amusing, in a way, because Hoskins wasn't the hairy-chested type. He just happened to be good at disc throwing.

"Well, now!" Captain Hendry said.

"We can be good losers, too, sir!" Miles reiterated, wtih vehemence, as if eager to convince himself.

"Oh, sure, sure we can!" Hendry agreed. "Only—suppose an athlete from another country beat us to the punch. Beat us at something we're really good at. We might applaud him a little with a wry face, being careful to conceal our resentment. Part of that applause would be honest, too. We're not incapable of generous impulses.

"But suppose the blondes and the redheads went all out for that big, brave hero from another land. Would we retire from the arena with good grace, with pleasure and delight?"

"Of course not, sir, but—"

"He'd be lucky if he escaped with his life. Wars start that way, son, and don't you forget it!"

"But the friendliness of these people embraces everything!" Miles protested. "They're just naturally friendly, brimming over with good will!"

"I know," Hendry said, scowling. "It won't hurt us to think about Freud for a minute or two. We may have the answer there!"

"Freud, sir?"

"You know the old theory. It has never been disproved."

Hendry stared up at the colossus as he spoke, a look of fear-tinged exasperation in his stare.

"Look at it this way, son. The subconscious is a mysterious thing, brimming over with all that's hateful in man. You've got to have some outlet for that jungle part of yourself, or you'll be pure brute, a beast with the intelligence of a man.

"If you try to keep it locked up in your mind, deny its existence, you won't behave like a man. Certainly not like these people. But suppose you let that jungle heritage

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flow out in a vicarious, harmless way. Suppose you think about it, and accept it? Suppose you talk about it for all the world to hear?"

"Talk about it, sir?"

"Exactly. Suppose you make a work of art that's the embodiment of primal hate, fear, rage, pure animal cunning and treachery, everything a truly civilized man despises in himself."

Hendry threw out his arms in a half gesture toward the colossus straddling the valley glow. "Look up there, son! That's it! There you see the subconscious brute in these people given substance, personified, made objective for all the world to see! And now these people are free. By making an open confession of their guilt they've purged themselves and attained real nobility."

Miles started. "By heaven, sir, I believe you've got something there!"

"Wait a minute, son. Let me finish. You can make a false confession too. The ancient Romans did that. They pretended the jungle heritage didn't exist. They worshipped a false nobility. The Magna Mater. A great stone image of a serene and beautiful woman, the soul of nobility, incapable of treachery or malice. And the Romans were quite the most bloodthirsty people in history."

"But, sir, you can't be serious!" Miles said, aghast. "That's not what we've been taught to believe. Brutal people *have* fashioned cruel primitive brutal idols!"

"That's true, son! But they still failed to make an honest confession. Take the Nazi hordes—or the hordes of Genghis Khan. They were twice as hypocritical as the Romans. They worshipped a brutal, *veiled* idol. The veil of mystical mumbo-jumbo distorted the brutality, so they could still pretend it didn't exist for them."

Miles looked up at the colossus and saw that it wore no veil. Its naked ugliness was unique.

MILES looked again at the friendly people. There was a sweet-souled gentleness in the eyes of the girl who knelt at Allison's feet. Miles realized suddenly that the girl would have liked Allison all for herself. Surely that was natural, human enough. But she was willing to relinquish Allison if holding on to him meant hating. Hate she could not abide.

She had made a confession, an honest confession, along with all of her people. Now she found it desirable to be grown up.

What a pity that Allison was such a scoundrelly brute. Incapable of loyalty to any one woman—

Wait, hold on. Such thoughts were jungle-spawned.

Miles looked at Hendry and said, "Sir, I've a confession to make. It confirms your theory, in a way!"

"Well, son?"

"Coming down here I experienced an upsurge of primal hate, sir, directed against Allison. I wanted to see him dead. I'm pretty sure you know why."

"I can guess, son," Hendry said.

"I let myself go, subconsciously. I didn't try to hide it from myself. I didn't try to tell myself that I was just being noble and protective. Oh, I did at first. But then I really let myself go. I saw red. My hands were pressed against Allison's windpipe and I was throttling him. Do you understand, sir? I was all brute, for a minute."

"Ah, yes—yes, son," Hendry sighed. "Our neolithic ancestors were all brutes for a good many minutes."

"It ceased to be just a subconscious thing, sir. It flowed up from the dark depths of my mind into imaged clearness. It became like that colossus, a conscious work of art, all evil, an honest confession which I made to myself!"

"And then you were free of it? It left you?"

"A good deal of it left me. I was a better man for it. Maybe if I had a lump of soft clay right now and could push it around and make it look like Allison—"

"That's what honest art is for, son. To tell us as much as we can endure to know about ourselves. Otherwise, we just go on being primitive and—two-faced, son!"

Two-faced!

Hendry raised his thin, bony hands in the sunlight and looked at them. Fiercely he told himself that he was not an old man.

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There was one test of youth—and only one. You couldn't tell how old a man was by pressing a stethoscope to his chest and testing his blood pressure. You had to look deep into his eyes. You had to ask him about—his memories.

The memories of an old man were like withered leaves falling on a stagnant pool at midnight. Not fresh and green and alive. And the scars of an old man were quite different from the scars of youth. An old man could not point to his scars as Hendry could and say: "There's room on my body for a hundred more. Even in pain and blindness I would not shrink from shining adventure!"

When a man remembered that way, when a man was proud of his scars, seventy-two years could not rob him of his right to feel young.

Hendry looked at the young girl in Allison's arms and a convulsive spasm twisted the muscles of his face. He did not begrudge Allison his day in the sun. No—he was two-faced in a different way.

Within him fierce tides of youth hammered and battered against the citadel of calm, mature wisdom he had become in the eyes of the world. No one suspected what a young colt he was still, how devil-may-care his thoughts could be. He had to keep all that under lock and key.

Miles suddenly realized that he was being stared at. One of the barbarian women was standing just outside the cave, looking carefully at him out of wide, dark, wondering eyes.

For a moment Miles did not breathe. He was acutely conscious of his limp, his intolerable scholar's shyness, his mental scars. If he walked toward her, limping, would she draw back? Turn and flee perhaps, into the cave?

For the first time he became fully aware of the true grace of these people, their childlike charm. Their features were strong and mobile, their complexions clear and they moved with the quick, free-limbed ease of forest creatures on Earth.

The women were as alert as gazeless, as easily startled, as quick to turn their large, limpid eyes upon a man and search for hidden, friendly meanings in the face he kept turned to the world.

Miles told himself that a deer hunter with a gun under his arm, emerging from a thicket, looking stern and harsh, would be totally disarmed by such eyes.

And why should he not respond to the shining tenderness and complete trust in the eyes of a woman who was in all respects the exact opposite of a hunted creature? Was she not edging toward him even now, a challenging eagerness in her stare?

Almost before Miles realized that he had moved the barbarian girl was in his arms. He kissed her, gently at first, because kissing was new to her and must have seemed very strange.

After a moment only Miles found it strange. Strange that he should be holding one woman in his arms and thinking of another, strange that warm lips could seem cold, the hair that fell across his shoulders remote, unreal. Strange that the barbarian girl was in no sense precious to him.

DISENTANGLING the girl's arms, Miles looked quickly away. If only he could speak to her in her own language, could tell her how sorry he was that he could not love her as she deserved to be loved.

A bitter despair took hold of Miles. He suddenly found that he couldn't endure the friendly people any longer. Just looking at them was pure torment.

He turned and walked into the cave, not caring whether he was followed or not. It was a quite ordinary cave, but as he moved through the gloom a curious relief crept upon him. Tension diminished, fell away.

With slow, confident steps he walked on. The cave was cool, spacious. Fresh, scented winds blew through it, carrying the fragrance of valley meadows, the peace of noonday glades. Clean earth smells were in his nostrils, the good magic of the earth, uncorked here on an alien world by the hypnotic tug of his thoughts.

He forgot the passage of time, his duty, the need of remaining in contact with his companions. A passage from a half-forgotten poem flashed through his mind. *And I*

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shall have some peace here, for peace comes dripping slow, dripping from out the vales of the morning to where the cricket sings . . .

As he walked on a glimmer of light came swimming toward him and grew brighter. The cave walls seemed to waver and recede and he suddenly found himself standing in the open again, staring up at a collossal stone figure.

THE figure was valley-spanning, lithe-limbed and athletic in aspect. It seemed to grow out of another figure which faced away from it—a misshapen, brutish figure. It seemed to be the Siamese twin of a pair of figures, one facing out into the valley, the other toward the cave mouth.

Above the towering stone body of the nearest figure was the carven face of a youth of great nobility, as serene and passionless as the stellar night.

For an instant Miles did not realize that he had emerged from the cave behind the brutish colossus, and was staring up at what should have been its back.

Then, slowly, his vision adjusted itself to the valley glare, and the significance of what he saw etched itself on his mind with the searing bite of an acid wash.

From the mouth of the cave to the base of the colusses the valley slope was strewn with human skeletons. Skeletons alone and in groups, huddled together as though for warmth, impaled in solitary agony on spits of garish sunlight, bent double, in fleeing attitudes, in attitudes seeming to denote uneasy repose.

Skeletons with their knees drawn up, their arms twisted inward. Skeletons flung headlong as if by some impossible-to-imagine violence, their bony fingers clawing at the earth. Skeletons standing upright, as still as the colossus itself, with long, glittering spears projecting from their backs.

There were at least a hundred skeletons between the cave and the towering stone youth. A hundred hideously impaled skeletons between the dark, earth-scented cave, and that stone-carven symbol of calm nobility and athletic grace.

The words seemed to form deep in the time-shadowed depths of Miles' mind—little whirling echoes of sound at first. Echoes taking form slowly, revolving and twisting in a fearful way, like maggots boring up to the sunlight through the deep subconscious murk.

Two-faced! The friendly people are—two-faced!

Abruptly the words crackled like thunder, bursting unbidden from Miles' shaking lips.

"Two-faced—two-faced—two-faced!"

Unaware that he had turned, Miles suddenly found himself running straight back through the cave, careening like a man with a fearful load on his shoulders, his breath coming in choking gasps.

Captain Hendry was still sitting on the rock when Miles emerged. A weary-eyed old man on a firmly-anchored gray rock, immune to alien pitfalls, resigned now to letting the friendliness seek out a younger target. Allison was still basking in the friendliness and Hoskins was hurling discs again. He seemed to like the game.

Miles could see the shadows of his companions on the stones, moving back and forth or hovering immobile while time itself seemed to stand still.

He walked straight up to Hendry, stooped and whispered hoarsely: "Something terrible has happened. I've made a discovery that changes everything we've believed about these people! Everything, do you understand?"

"Well?" Hendry said, with a hint of weariness. "What is it, Jim?"

Miles told him.

Hendry blanched; then leapt up with a startled cry. "I might have known!" he groaned. "Parallel evolution, up to a point. Then a divergence so wide it strikes at the very core of life."

Miles nodded. "The divergence is mental. Their minds must metamorphose at intervals."

"With the sun, perhaps!" Hendry muttered, his eyes glittering. "A cyclic change. They may be noble by day, evil by night. That's just a guess, of course. The change may come once a month, or once a year."

"Or hourly!" Miles said.

"Yes, yes. Hourly. When they're friendly they make an honest confession, to purge

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themselves of evil. They keep before their eyes the image of a brute. When they're cruel and evil they make a lying confession. They worship a noble youth!"

"We've got to get back to the ship, sir!" Miles said.

"Yes!" agreed Hendry. "I'll tell Allison."

Captain Hendry turned, walked to the cave and talked for a full minute to Allison. The shadows seemed to deepen as Miles watched. There was an illusion of twilight.

For a moment Allison sat very still, frowning. Then, suddenly, he was laughing. The light grew dim and red as he gestured out into the valley.

Miles felt a cold horror constricting his chest. Was Allison quite mad?

When Captain Hendry returned to Miles' side his lips were tight. "He doesn't believe you, Jim," he said. "He refuses to budge!"

"Tell him to walk through the cave and look up!" Miles said, passionately.

"It's no use, Jim!" Hendry affirmed, with grim finality. "He doesn't want to believe."

"Then we'll have to leave without him, sir. The safety of the ship comes first."

Hendry shot a quick, searching glance at Miles.

Miles nodded grimly. "I don't hate him now, sir. When I saw those skeletons all that was purged away."

Hendry raised his eyes and stared at the cave for an instant in silence. His shoulders jerked. "Very well, son," he declared finally. "I'm glad you have the courage to face facts bluntly, even if it does seem to put you in a bad light."

"The hell what kind of a light it puts me in, sir. We've got to clear out."

"Right!" Hendry's face showed genuine relief. "I'll tell Hoskins."

Ten minutes later the three men from Earth were high on the valley slope, walking back to the ship with the valley mist deepening about them.

Suddenly Hendry stopped. He laid his hand on Miles' sleeve, his lips white. "Listen!" he said.

It was a human cry that tore out of the stillness, long-drawn, agonized. Yet in some ways it resembled more the cry of a wild beast with its leg caught in a trap.

THE cry was followed by a silence. Then a pattering began deep in the valley and grew swiftly louder. It was not a difficult sound to identify. It was unmistakably the sound of running feet, of many feet running. Treading softly, lightly, but ascending the slope toward the three men from Earth.

Captain Hendry tried to turn. But something seemed to twist him about and hold him rooted, his body as rigid as a metal spike driven deep into the ground.

Hoskins fell back, shading his eyes against the valley glare, his face as grim as death. Miles simply turned quickly, his hand darting to the compact little energy weapon at his hip.

The first of the pursuing barbarians came into view suddenly, a straight, tawny-skinned figure running with his head thrown back.

For an instant brief as a dropped heartbeat Miles opened his mind wide to all the impressions of sense. He saw the long, shining spear, quivering and deadly, the running man's straining throat muscles, the wind-stirred foliage behind him.

A rippling sea shelving to shark-infested shoals, horrible, deadly. Structurally the barbarian's face wasn't apelike. But savage cruelty and cold, bestial rage could do strange things to the lineaments of a human face. The eyes of the running man were slitted on a glaze of hate, and death flashed in the raised spear and danced in the valley shadows. Hate and death—hate and death—

Miles blasted as he would have blasted at a cobra swirling toward him with distended hood, quickly, and without emotion, his gaze riveted on the barbarian's chest.

There was a deafening blast, followed by an incandescent burst of light. For an instant the glare coalesced, hovering like a wind-buffeted fireball in the still air a yard from Miles' arm.

Then long, darting filaments of flame swept from it. They pierced the running man, lifted him up, and hurled him backwards down the slope. He screamed once—and was silent.

After a moment Miles became aware that Hendry was blasting too. Through the

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flames which danced on the slope a dozen running forms emerged, only to be hurled backwards down the slope. Just before the firing ceased Hoskins joined in, with a terrible, despairing cry.

There was no need for despair, however, for when the last barbarian fell silence returned to the valley. A silence broken only by the faint rustling of leaves in motion, and the harsh breathing of the men from Earth.

Miles was the first to speak. "We've got to go back," he said. "Weaker men than Allison have survived a spear thrust!"

"You're right, lad!" Hendry said, a set look on his face. "We can't leave him here to die so far from Earth. And if he *is* dead —we've got to see he gets a decent, dignified burial!"

"For all his criminal stubbornness, lad!" Hendry added, nodding.

As darkness deepened in the now almost shapeless sky the men from Earth turned back.

They found Allison lying in shadows close to the cave, stirring a little, a dark stain on his shoulder.

Together they lifted him up.

The men from Earth returned to the ship stumbling a little under their burden, remembering the friendliness, wishing they could have the friendliness back again, but knowing full well that self-preservation was the first law of life.

The ship swept up from the valley like a great, silver gull, its vanes catching the sunlight and throwing a wheeling shadow on the green world below.

The door of Miles' cabin opened and footsteps sounded on the deck.

Miles sat listening to the footsteps draw close. He pressed a blotter to a paper wet with ink, watched black lines seep through, wondered if he had succeeded in smudging his official report.

"Jim!" Barbara Maitland said.

Miles kept his eyes on the blotter, moving his shoulders ever so little, worrying about the ink.

"It's a little hard for me to say this, Jim! But could you forgive a girl for being blind —and a fool?"

Miles was a little slow in getting to his feet. But he wasn't slow in taking Barbara Maitland into his arms and crushing her to him in a tight, unyielding embrace, the throbbing at his temples blending with the steady droning of the ship.

Do You Forget, Enchantress?

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

THE Muses all are silent for your sake:
While night and distance take
The hamadryad's hill, the naiad's vale:
Low drops the hippocentaur's golden tail;
And sleep whelmed the satyrs in the brake.

Unplucked, the laurels stand as long ago;
The balms of Eros blow
Rose-red and secret in the cedar's pall. . . .
Do you forget, enchantress, or recall
The world you fashioned once, and now forego?

Where, Venus-like from Lethe and the abyss,
Might rise the abandoned bliss;
Where the mute Muses bide your summoning word;
Where darkling faun and daemon drowse unstirred,
Waiting the invocation of your kiss?

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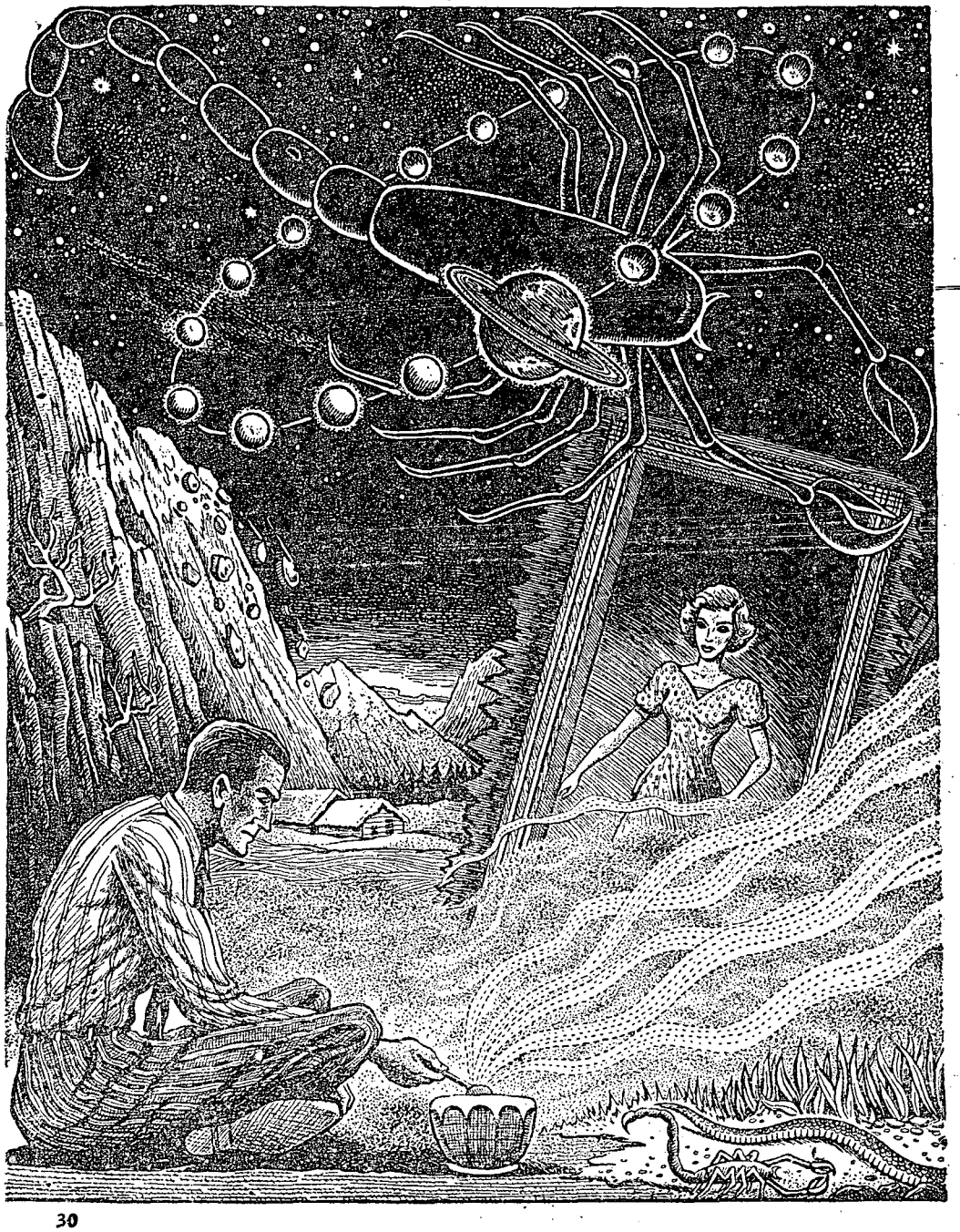
The Shadow of Saturn

By E. Hoffmann Price



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Magic is directed will, black it may be as is occult surgery.

WHAT I have to say about the Siamese triplets will have nothing at all to do with any linking together of physical bodies. The bond which connected Dick Wayland, and Benson's wife, Diane, was an invisible one.

Of the three, Wayland was the first I met. His upper eyelids, lurking beneath overhanging brows, betrayed their existence only by the lashes. His eyes had a purpose more important merely than looking and seeing. Except to a person of considerable self-assurance, they could have been intolerable whenever he chose to make them so. Now, however, they were amiable and winning as his voice.

"Why won't you tell me how long I have to live, Mr. McQuoid?"

"If your health worries you, why not see your doctor instead of an astrologer?"

The man's will drew back like a well-trained leopard, to remain poised behind the persuasiveness of smile and eyes. The nose, neither straight nor aquiline, added to his expression of power consciousness.

"There used to be a time," he retorted, "when no doctor worth his salt was ignorant of astrology, and no astrologer ignorant of medicine. Just why won't you tell me how many years I have ahead of me?"

"In the first place, to do so would be a violation of professional ethics." I fingered the letter and the check which he had sent a few days previously. "In the second place, when you wrote me the minute and hour and date of birth, and the town also, you left out something quite important."

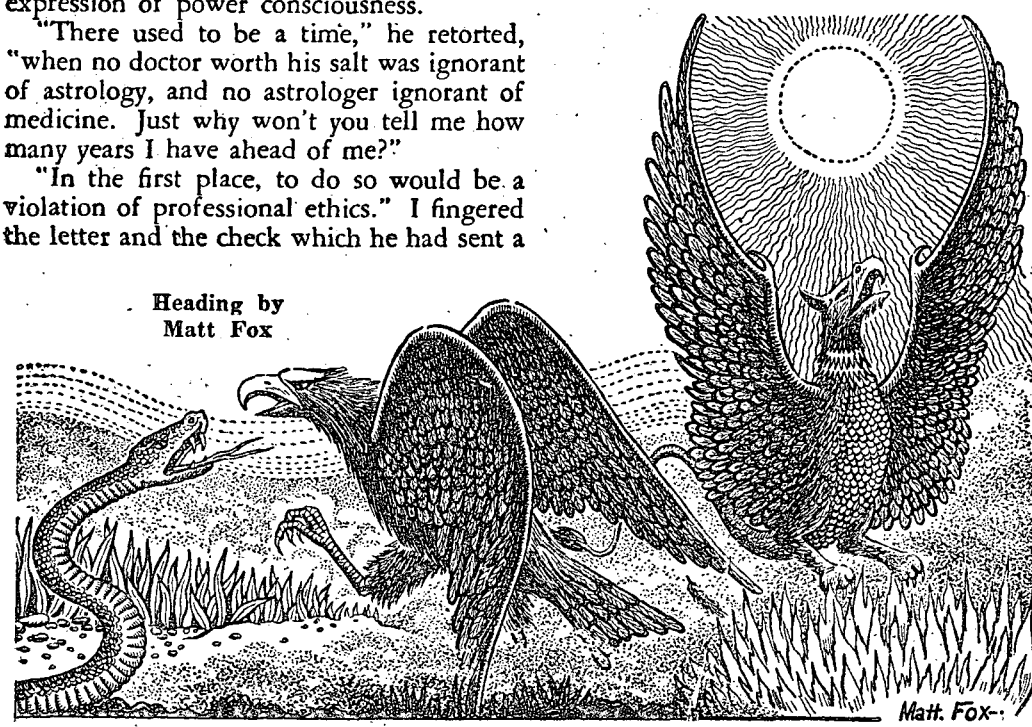
"What was that?"

"You did not tell me that this is another man's birth data, not your own. If only because you tried to trick me, I wouldn't deal with you!"

"Do you mean," he demanded, "that you believe you can judge at first sight whether I am older or younger than the date indicates?"

"The horoscope I set up describes a man taller and heavier than you are, Mr. Wayland. He has a squarish face. He is ruddy, he has thick hands and a thick neck, and is probably on the way to being bald. He loves spotlight. You prefer being the power behind the throne. Next time you try to pull a fast one, send data to fit."

Wayland, however, was persistent. He wagged his head appreciatively and countered, "That was to see whether you knew



Heading by Matt Fox

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your business. You said, *he*. That happens to be a woman's birth data."

"You never can get your fill, can you? Only a male could have been born when the degree corresponding to that time was rising. This cannot be a woman's birth time. Here is your check. There is no charge. Whatever you are up to, I don't want to deal with you."

"Oh, all right, Mr. McQuoid! There are three of us in this. He and she and I. It is one of those situations."

"And it's important for you and her to outlive him?"

"Yes," he answered. "First time in my life that anything ever has been really important."

Whether I wanted it or not, I had a client; three clients, in fact. Although I did not for a moment feel that Wayland would use pistol or poison to reshape things to his taste, it was clear that something deadly was developing.

"Give me your birth data, and hers."

When he did so, I opened the 1890-1930 ephemeris to his birth month and glanced at the positions of the planets on his day. Usually one has to draw a map of the heavens, the twelve-spoked Wheel of Fate, to see what influences ruled a man. Wayland's stars on the contrary were so conspicuously aspected as to shout from the page. And a glance at the Table of Houses clinched it.

"At your birth," I told him, "the seventh degree of Scorpio was rising."

"What's wrong with *that?*"

I pointed to the wall chart. "Most signs of the zodiac have only one symbol. Yours has four. There is the scorpion, waiting in the dust and ready with his poisonous barb. There is the snake crawling in the grass with his poison. There is the eagle of pride, flying up to stare the sun out of countenance. Finally there is the Phoenix —reborn man, freed of earth, and become god-like. And judging from your stars, your eagle is still in the dust, playing with snakes and scorpions.

"You are using an invisible weapon, your will power. Like an Australian bushman, 'pointing the bone' to will someone to death."

"That's not true!"

"Whether you know it or not, you are practicing black magic. If it weren't for my bare chance of opening your eyes, I'd wash my hands of the entire business, and good-riddance! Pick up your check—I can't take any pay."

"Why not? This is important to me."

"If a man asks a lifeguard to give him swimming lessons on his day off duty, payment is in order. But you rarely hear of a lifeguard offering a drowning man swimming lessons at so much an hour. I'll see you when I've studied your chart and hers and his."

Wayland—Benson—Diane—they were Siamese triplets; and Wayland was a blind man with a kit of psychic surgical instruments, trying to cut the invisible bond, so that he and Diane would be free to start a new life together. While the operation might succeed, not one of the three patients could survive.

All this became so clear and so haunting that I broke away from a dinner party right after the coffee and brandy; and on my way home, I followed an impulse and went directly to Wayland's place in the foothills behind Atherton.

The house was on a bald knoll whose base was fringed with oaks. Knowing well the atrocious parking most country places offer, I left my car at the level spot not far from the entrance. The ascent was neither long nor steep, yet the effect was odd. At first I thought that too many cigarettes and too many years sitting at a desk had made me more short-winded than I had realized; but it proved to be another sort of breathlessness, and it was combined with that light-headedness which one experiences after a swift drive from six or seven thousand feet elevation down to sea level.

It is not so much an actual giddiness as it is a sensing that one's balance is slightly off; that one's own voice sounds like someone else's; probably all this is because the inner ear, which seems to control equilibrium, has not had a chance to readjust itself to the change of pressure.

Ear . . . inner ear . . . sound . . . *sound*, not elevation at all!

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Yet there was no more than a suggestion of sound, and that so uncertain as to be no more than premonition that I should presently hear something. Still and all, it played tricks with the equilibrium mechanism, so that I had to exert a conscious effort, however slight, to remain normally balanced.

Presently the sound became audible, yet hearing it was something like seeing an iceberg—in that what is perceived is less than a tenth of all that is actually there. The unheard part of what came from the house was what had the disturbing force. The murmuring, the rustling, the whispering were only the perceptible indication of something beneath the level of hearing.

Wayland was beating a drum. Not a snare drum, not a bass drum, not a tympanum, but something far more primitive. Perhaps remember the travelogue and sound track which Harrison Smith recently brought back from Tibet? Hundreds of yellow-robed lamas gathered to chant to the sunrise.

AUM! Mani padme hum! AUM! Tat Savitur varenyam!

Wayland's drumming was like the chanting of those lamas; and I began to understand as from direct experience why the explorer had insisted that the actual chant gave an effect which the sound track did not have; that the intoning of *mantrams* literally went to one's head, and seemed to wrench the sutures of the skull, and to hammer the nerve center of the solar plexus.

Pain and dizziness became more pronounced. I could not feel the porch flooring under my tread. It was as if gravity had ceased to act. I caught at the jamb, and got a glance through the small pane, slantwise through vestibule and archway and into the living room. Wayland sat on the floor. He had a saddle drum whose wooden shell was no larger than a good-sized mixing bowl. With one hand he beat the head.

Beat is hardly the word. For while he did tap with knuckles and fingertips, and heel of the hand, and slapped with the palm, the strokes were only at times percussive. He varied the impacts by rippling his fingertips as though on the keys of a piano. He made dragging, caressing sweeps. There was only a little sound: a murmuring, a whispering, a muttering, like the persistence of a gong note when the bronze is stilled yet not actually mute.

He swayed and nodded. It was as though he had become a mechanical toy. Wayland was absent: what I saw was his animated frame. The man himself had stepped into another dimension. His will, carried on drumbeats, reached out. What I felt was only the eddying backwash of the currents which he was directing elsewhere.

Wayland was making magic. Magic, stripped of ritual, is nothing more than directed and controlled vibration, the carrier wave of concentrated will, of pure power. Thought, in its plane, is moulded into shape as are iron or clay on the material plane.

I groped, fumbled for the pushbutton. Whoever was receiving the directed impulses of Wayland's drumming was being twisted on a psychic rack. Though I found the button, my fingers acted as though they belonged to someone else. While not ignoring my will, they seemed unable to understand or obey. Rather, my will was groping, hobbled, stumbling.

That beating, that surging, those flashes and whirlpools of light in my own head were the interference waves of a fourth dimensional heterodyne: the illusion of sound and light, images made stronger by twisted nerves.

The geometry of the room was warping out of all relation to reality. It was not only as though I now saw Wayland at once full face and in profile; it was as though, without disturbance of the walls, there was an additional dimension down which I could see all the way to infinity. Perspective became wholly false. The woman who came down the hyper-dimensional spiral changed rather in figure and feature and expression than in apparent height as she moved from infinite remoteness to step at last into the room.

WHEN the face and form solidified, I recognized Diane Benson. The Ascending Sign of her horoscope had correctly described head shape and carriage, the set of the shoulders, the expression of the dark eyes. I had expected unusual brunette

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beauty, with Saturn in Libra: Diane went far beyond expectation.

Wayland seemed not to see her, nor she, him. Yet her lips moved, and her eyes, at once haunting and haunted, were fixed as on someone facing her.

Whatever this was, it would be dangerous to interrupt, even if I could. But the hand which had so long been unable to obey now acted as though of its own will. Space rearranged itself. The bell snarled in the hallway. Wayland continued his drumming; however, the sound was only a normal one, the curiously stirring appeal of drums. The apparition of Diane had vanished.

I RANG again, and gave the knob a twist and a rattle. The door opened without warning. I lurched headlong across the threshold and into the hall. Wayland yelled, jumped up, and checked himself against a chair.

"Where the devil'd you come from?"

"Walked in. I rang, but it seems your drum kept you from hearing. I must have got impatient and jiggled the door and it wasn't latched. Sorry I startled you."

Though Wayland had not yet wholly returned into himself, he made a characteristic grimace, wry and half-humorous. "Drums always have fascinated me. This one's more relaxing than liquor. You can have your electric organs and the like, I'll take a drum for self-expression."

"This is an odd one," I said, kneeling to get a close look. "Wouldn't be out of place in a museum. Is it something liberated during the war?"

He shook his head. "I picked it up when they auctioned the St. Cyr estate. Junk from the trophy room. Persian armor, Zulu assegai, Tibetan statuette—and this." He reached for the decanter on the tile-topped cocktail table. "Bourbon?"

"Thanks, no. I just broke away from dinner, and followed the impulse to barge in. I had you three people so strongly in mind I couldn't stay in step with sociability this evening."

"Well, now! What did our horoscopes tell you?"

"You're practicing black magic with that drum. If you are not trying to will him to death, you are trying to will her to pack up and run out with you. Pretty mess, you and he, law partners!"

Wayland's face tightened. "How would I be able to do anything of the sort, assuming I were trying to?"

"About one human in every hundred thousand, perhaps one in every million, let's not quibble about numbers, has *will* power. The others aren't able to go beyond mere wishing, hoping. Wish is a firecracker, will is an A-bomb. Wishing is an emotional muddle. Will is pure force. It's the same as electricity, magnetism, gravity, heat, light. It is energy directed and harmonious. That's what you're dabbling with and you're very likely to destroy everyone concerned—yourself, her, and him!"

Wayland's downdroop of the brows, further shading his eyes, told me he had been impressed, so I bored in. "When matter disintegrates it becomes energy. When energy is collected and organized, it becomes matter. The whole material universe is nothing but organized will, and you, you damned fool, are playing with *that!* With a psychic A-bomb. Quit it!"

"You said, black magic."

"Magic is directed will. It is black when directed for your own wishes, even if they are good, as people ordinarily reckon good."

"Aren't you going a bit too far, just looking at the stars?"

"No, I'm not. The way her horoscope is related to yours and to her husband's is such that a danger to one of you is a danger to all three."

And then I told him what I had heard and seen before shock made me give the door a wrench.

Wayland's eyes, probably for the first time in his life, opened wide. "Is that true? Man to man, is it?"

"Could I have cooked it up out of my imagination? And if I were trying to fool you, wouldn't I have picked something more plausible?"

That seemed to satisfy him, for he asked, "How do you explain it? My being able to —to will this, do this."

"If you can accept the idea of reincarna-

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tion, at least as something possible—if you can accept the idea of *karma,* the law of cause and effect, the law that every action and every desire sets in motion a train of events—that, life after life, we come back, bound to those we have either loved or hated in previous lives—if that is not too much for you to swallow, I'd risk answering your question. Not with the idea that you should believe it, but that you would not set yourself against it without taking at least a moment's thought."

He gave me an odd look. "I've heard of such things. Hearing a little more won't hurt. But am I to understand that an astrologer can read a man's past lives?"

"To a degree, yes. And the probable trend of his next life. The stars tell all. The only limitation is man's ability to read them. Anyway, you and Benson are law partners, a quite prosaic and matter of fact profession. But you, in your former lives, learned something of the science of vibration. Now you are using it with the self centeredness you've always had. Though never before have you had the power to go with the selfishness.

"Here is your test—will you be a scorpion, or a Phoenix?"

By way of accepting the challenge, he told me about himself and Diane and Benson. There was nothing novel about the situation, not even in the frills and trimming. Benson and Diane had outlived whatever love they might have had—but he wasn't going to let anyone else have her. It gave him a sense of power to hold out, to command; and Diane would not leave her husband, which infuriated Wayland.

"Chicken-hearted!" he summed up. "Nobody'd be hurt, really!"

"She is not what you call chicken-hearted," I told him. "She is simply incapable of changing an innate conviction. That is by no means the same as being stubborn from pride. She was born under fixed signs. In whatsoever pattern such a person is set, she is there to stay. Change is possible, but very slowly, and it has to come from within, never from without. Don't you understand?"

"No! That makes no sense whatever!"

"Probably not. Scorpio, your sign, is also a fixed one."

BEFORE that jab had a chance to sink in, a car came up the drive. Wayland exclaimed as though in recognition of its sound. He bounded to the window. After a glance out, he turned on me, exclaiming, "There she is now! Get out, will you? Whatever's brought her here, I don't want her embarrassed—get out! No, Lord, no! Not out the front—leave by the back—that way—"

His gesture had the force to match the ferocity of his voice. Impatience, resentment at my meddling presence; and, triumph also: he conveyed all these with eye and tone.

I was in the laundry alcove before Wayland opened the front door. I heard her greet him with an inarticulate cry rather than with words. Then a few heel clicks, sharp and jarring, and she was in the living room with Wayland.

Diane was trying to explain her inexplicable urge, and why she had not phoned. She was violently agitated, and scarcely coherent; this, with the echo of distortion of vestibule and hall kept me from catching more than a few words.

". . . for a minute I was so dizzy I pulled over to the side of the road. . . . I must have blacked out . . . no, darling, nothing has gone wrong—I simply had to get out . . . had to and did, and oh, it was the strangest, craziest thing, heading for your place, but I had to!"

He said something to the effect that a drink would do her good. While he had himself under better control than she had, more had happened than he was able to understand. I twisted the latch knob, and very carefully opened the door. After this unexpected demonstration of his power to command her will, Wayland would certainly not pay heed to anything I might say to him later.

It seemed, as I skirted the house, that my meddling had done more harm than good, for in telling him what I had seen, I had given him an awareness of a power he had apparently been exercising blindly.

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Once in the parking circle, I saw her coupe. I looked into it. She had brought no luggage. But that did not prove that he and she might not leave within the hour, and not to return. This could well be Wayland's long-awaited victory, won by magic.

I WAS at the the foot of the grade, and in the deep shadow of the oaks under which I had parked when a long convertible swung into Wayland's drive, tires squealing and scattering gravel. With well over four million cars registered in California, the odds were very much against my guessing correctly whose it was that swooped up the grade and around the curves. But since I, a spectator, had been drawn into the outer fringe of the "sending," it was likely enough that Wayland's drumming had affected Benson; or that Benson had simply trailed his wife.

By the time I returned to the level of the house, the visitor was indoors. To avoid a betraying latch click, I had not closed the back door after me. In another moment, I was again in the laundry alcove, and tiptoeing for the front.

"Don't be piggish, Dick," a man was saying. "Diane's life is her own, she's entitled to it, whatever you two have together is your own business. As long as it's kept quiet and private. But when she blows her top and bounces out of the house, jet propelled, after getting rid of some guests by telling them she had a headache, it's going too far!"

By now I knew that the speaker *was* Ron Benson. Diane was crying, and insisting that it had not been Wayland's fault; that she had followed an irresistible impulse. And Wayland, seeing no good in discussing magic, got down to a point of his own:

"We're serious, Ron. This went way past the flirtation stage a long time ago. She and I did not have an engagement this evening, and if we had had, I'd certainly not expect her to hustle unexpected callers out of your house. And since that's what she seems to have done, you can put two and two together. You might as well be realistic. The situation is getting under her skin. Break it up, neither is good for the other any more."

As Wayland paused for breath, Benson broke in, "If Diane left me to marry you, you can figure what would happen to our practice. Our clients would lose confidence in us as a team. So quit the sentimental schoolboy stuff and act grown up! She's getting no divorce—" He chuckled affably. "She can't. No more than could I. Everything's too comfortably complicated, you know."

And that was when I left. Their fate seemed now to be so much and so immediately in their own hands that details did not matter. It was not until several days later, when Diane Benson called at my studio, that I learned that nothing had been decided, and that Wayland was more than ever at work, forcing a decision.

She was not as tall as she looked, nor was it the high heels; the illusion came from the way she carried herself. Diane was that uttermost rarity, a woman who knew how to walk. Her hair was all alive, and even though its vital quality might have been the result of skillful processing, no beauty parlor could possibly have given her skin that exceedingly fine texture. Most important, however, were the dark eyes. They told that from living and learning, she had reached full human stature; the other two of the Siamese triplet had not, though their chance was just around the corner of Time.

She summed up what had happened, and except for details, told me nothing I did not already know. She concluded, "Dick finally admitted he had been willing me to leave Ron, commanding me to. Though he certainly hadn't intended to have me drive about in a trance, and just on the verge of being blacked out. He promised most faithfully he would not try any such tricks again."

HER features were perfectly under control, with an almost Asiatic serenity, except for the twitch of her eyelids.

"Well?"

"Now he's concentrating on Ron."

"You mean that your husband has begun to take drives like the one that gave you such a shock? Neat way of making you a widow?"

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"Oh, Lord, no! Nothing like that. Dick has simply been willing Ron to release me."

"And you're not cooperating a bit, when you could make yourself so thoroughly obnoxious in a million dainty feminine ways that your husband would in no time at all be glad to give you to the Indians. Easiest thing on earth, only you've not done it. Why not?"

"Call it a matter of obligation. No one and nothing compelled me to marry Ron. I knew I was wrong at the time, but I went ahead anyway. Because he was good to me, and because I was all in a whirl, looking for escape, and nowhere to go. I didn't love him, but I liked him. He was solid, he had his feet on the ground. Oh, you wouldn't understand what I mean by escape!"

"Wouldn't I? Escape seems to be humanity's career, and first urge."

"I think this must have been escape from myself," she went on. "Or from the giddy crowd I was part of. Nothing seemed especially important, and nothing was. Except getting away."

I pointed to the column of solar arcs on the margin of her chart. "Sun square Venus and Neptune. Saturn crossed midheaven. Say, 1945, in the autumn?" At her nod, I continued, "Escape or rather the attempt to didn't work out at all, and so?"

"Somehow or other, I realized that one can't ever escape from oneself and from what one has made. One has to stick and see it through. If I forced the issue and walked out on Ron, all I'd do would bring Dick grief in one way or another, and we'd probably end by being each other's stumbling blocks, resenting and accusing each other. I'd rather stay and pay my bill, my debt to fate. I have to pay it before I can ever have someone I really love. Idiotic sounding, isn't it? But that's how I feel."

"Did someone tell you what you've just told me, or did you read it, or—?"

"It simply came to me. That you can't run away from what you've made for yourself. It follows you wherever you go. Does that make sense?"

"That," I told her, "is the beginning and the end and the entire substance of Wisdom. You've stated the Law of Karma. You set forces in motion, and now you're at the receiving end until the forces have expended themselves. And what worries you right now is that Dick Wayland is setting fresh forces in motion."

She nodded. "Will you *please* tell Dick that whatever he's doing, holding a thought or whatever he wishes to call it, it is not working out the way he wants it to. Ron is becoming morbid, shaky, and stubborn."

"Why not tell him yourself?"

"He'd only laugh and say I'm chicken-hearted. He insists that he and I belong to each other. That Ron encouraged the flirtation, largely for his own convenience, and now it's up to him to like what he promoted."

"Promoted? So you'd look the other way while he had some other woman on the brain?" I glanced at the chart. "The spring of 1948?"

"That's right. And I was very happy about it all. Taking the easy view of things again! When I could have made a break and been free—ever hear of anything so utterly crazy."

"Pardon my yawn," I said, and gestured toward the filing cabinet. "I've lost count of the number of times I've charted that story. There's not even a bit of novelty about the three of you being so civilized about it all. There is only one thing unusual about you three, and maybe I can convince Dick Wayland."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"It's not necessary to tell you, so I won't. Words may very often set forces in motion, too, you know. The same as acts or desires."

"Suppose Ron went to the mountains for a couple of weeks. That'd break the close association—they've both been working day and night on a case that's wound up now, and a change of pace wouldn't hurt a bit. That's the oddest thing about it all—the way they work together, and really like each other—there isn't any jealousy or animosity, or can you believe that?"

"Just because it's never allowed to happen in fiction, on the ground that it's quite impossible, and that they simply ought to

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hate each other, doesn't keep it from happening in actual life."

"So you see where that puts me! They're close as brothers."

"Much closer," I told her. "You three. That's what's dangerous. There's nothing I could tell your husband—he's a down-to-earth thinker—but I'll talk to Wayland. He can understand, if he wants to."

"But can't you tell me now what to do, what not to do, how it's going to turn out?"

"No."

"That makes you a queer sort of astrologer!" She spoke without petulance; she was merely puzzled. "After all, that's your business, predicting and foreseeing?"

"You're confusing astrology with fortune telling. There is one element which never shows in any horoscope."

"What's that?"

"Will and choice. The stars shape your personality and the pattern of your moods, your peaks of vitality and your depths of depression. But whether your mood will rule you, or you rule it is a matter of choice. There's neither pure predestination nor purely free will—there is rather a blend. You can't escape from the circle of your fate, but within the circle, you have a million choices. Whatever I said to you now would influence you, and since there is no real need of my saying anything, I am not saying it."

"I think I understand," she said, and when Diane left, it seemed that she had actually understood; and the eyelids had quit twitching from tension.

Whether or not Benson's leaving town for awhile would get him beyond the range of Wayland's magic was an open question. He might go into the mountains to set to work with his drum. I began to consider the merits of breaking into his house and burning that diabolical instrument, but ending by discarding the thought. Destroying the drum would not decontaminate Wayland's will, without which no amount of thumping would have any force at all.

When I phoned the office and learned that Benson would be away for a week, I went to see Wayland; and, as before, without first calling him.

He was at it when I arrived. There was that same inaudible undertone of vibration, the same queer and distressing effect, but apparently he had not yet got his will in tune with the rhythm. While the archway opening into the living room had begun to warp, and the walls were approaching a shimmering translucence, there was not yet any opening into higher dimensions.

I rang, and called his name. No answer.

Another jangle, another shout. Concentration broken, Wayland came pouncing for the door. I endured his eyes, and said, "You wanted to know how long Benson had to live, and I wouldn't answer. I may not tell you now, but you have forced me pretty close to telling."

"Come in."

"Get in touch with Mrs. Benson. Let me talk to the two of you at the same time."

"She went with him as far as Modesto—she'll be visiting relatives there while he and two friends from around there are up at the lodge, fishing. If you have a good argument, you don't need her here to team up with you."

I spread the three horoscopes on the cocktail table. "In each chart, the malefic planets are so placed, were so placed at the birth of each of you, that when the daily motion of the planets—the transits, that is—puts one of you under a disastrous influence, the other two are likewise under it."

"It looks as clear to me as the fine print in an insurance policy is to anyone but an insurance broker!"

"All right, take my word for it, then. You three are linked more closely than the Siamese twins were to each other. Except that you're not bound together by flesh and cartilage, but by your karma—by your associations in former lives you are so linked that you cannot be separated. Trying to cut him loose will finish all three.

"She told me how she drove out here, that night, almost in a total blackout."

He nodded. "All right. That cured me of trying to influence her."

"Pouring the power on him can drive him into a fatal accident."

"It needn't!" Wayland retorted.

"What you really mean is that as long as

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you don't shove him off a cliff with your own hand, it's quite all right. I've come to tell you that if you finish him by remote control, by accident as it will appear, you will at the same time finish her, and yourself as well."

He was doing his best not to believe me; at last he said, doggedly, "All I was doing was willing him to release her."

"And that's getting him into such a muddle he'll drive head-on into a collision, or step off a cliff, or forget that a gun is loaded. You've been bringing things to a climax, and the stars are getting closer and closer to the transit that will touch things off. You'll liberate her, all right, and him, and yourself, but not in the way you want."

"I am here. She is in Modesto, with her sister. He and Fred and Dave Sims are up at the lodge, not far from Sonora Pass. How the devil could anything hit us all at once?"

"It need not be all at once in the kind of time and space we know. Though you have been monkeying with time and space of another sort. But skip that. If something happened to him alone, it would kick back at you and her. She'd never again be the same. She would know that you caused it. And that would be hard to take. If you simply must be rational and materialistic, I'll put it this way, as one of many possibilities—the strain, the tension, the upset, would make you both accident-prones. And the corporations that retain you are constantly in hot water about the accident-prones on their payrolls. Don't tell me you don't fully understand what I mean. Accidents don't simply happen—they are caused by the tangles and confusions in the subcellars of the subconscious."

He gave me a twisted smile. "I thought it was the stars?"

"Same thing!"

He said, slowly, "We three are in danger that I am making?"

"You're a butcher boy trying to separate Siamese triplets. There is only one way to break the bond that holds you three together."

"What is that way?"

"Quit driving with that will of yours! Burn that drum. It may not have any real bearing on the case at all. It could not have, unless you had the will to make it serve you. Destroying it would nonetheless be an outward token that you have abandoned occult surgery. That you are accepting things as they are. That you have quit trying to rearrange lives. That you have renounced your stubbornness and your arrogance and the importance of your own desires. That you've become a grown-up man.

"Go to that lodge with the drum and burn it, right before him."

"Fine business, with the Sims boys there!"

"Herd them out for a bit of fishing, while you and he supposedly confer on an emergency that's just come up."

Wayland snatched the drum. "Will you go with me?"

"Any time you say."

He glanced at his watch. "Make it now."

I said, "We can take it easy, and be there in time for breakfast. That'll make it natural and easy for the Sims brothers to carry on with their fishing."

"You're afraid to trust me alone with this drum till tomorrow."

"I'm afraid to trust your moods and thinking. Let's go."

WE DROVE through the warmth of the great central valley. A red moon came up through low-hanging haze. Wayland took his time, yet there was constant demand on his skill until we finally got out of the unbroken procession of trucks. He was busy with more than driving. He was thinking, digesting, analyzing, after the fashion of his sign. It was not until the moon was high and white, and valley sultriness replaced by mountain chill that he spoke.

"I'm glad we picked the situation to pieces," he said, abruptly. "One thing though that you skipped."

"Could be more than one, but let's have it."

"If the three of us are so tied together, there is nothing left to reach for. I don't need a certificate of title to Diane. There's nothing left to be had—we already have everything there is. Funny, that's about the

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way she expressed it, when she and I started. We'd not upset any applecarts, we'd hurt no one. She must have known from the beginning, subconsciously at least, what it's taken me until now to get through my head. I think I've become so used to complicated cases in my practice that anything really simple confuses me."

The eagle, I now knew, had at last begun to use his eyes for some purpose other than trying to stare the sun out of countenance. Wayland's company was no longer disturbing. He had ceased radiating that remorseless and avaricious will. He was becoming human.

We stopped once for gas, and several times for coffee. The wind whining down from snowcaps reaching twelve thousand feet into the moonlight had a biting edge. The thin air at once soothed aand stimulated Wayland.

"She was speaking of karma. Fumbling with your words, but somehow, speaking in her own right. It wasn't exactly retribution, or crime and punishment. It seemed bigger than all those."

"It is bigger. Thoughts, desires, cravings set up vibrations. People are drawn to each other, either for love or for hate, because they vibrate in the same wave length. The only way to break a bond is to change the wave length of your thoughts and feelings. Once that's done, you make new contacts, there are new attractions, for better or for worse."

This was oversimplifying things; but what checked Wayland's impending query was our coming to a road marker. There we left the paved highway to go laboriously up what was little more than a wagon track.

Above the mumble of the engine, I caught the mutter of distant waterfalls. Once, I heard a far-off rumbling. The previous winter's snows were beginning to shift and slide.

Gray glamor reached in and thinned the darkness of the pines. The gray became an eerie lavender. The headlights, now murky and deceptive, created illusions, through reflection from foliage and granite walls, to make it seem at times that Wayland was about to drive over the edge of a thousand-foot drop. Fatigue made such illusion more disturbingly realistic.

Wayland cursed, booted the brake, and whipped into a skid. There was a grinding sound. As the car slewed over, a fender crumpled. After spinning the wheels in a futile effort to pull out of the ditch, a shallow one, Wayland said, "Well, it could be a lot worse. We're almost there. Ron can tow us out."

It was only then that I noticed the boulder which, because of the deceptive light, Wayland had not observed until he had come within a couple yards of straddling it. A small fragment had wedged under the oil pan. We tugged and heaved until we got the larger obstacle against the bank, and out of the way. It was wet and muddy; apparently it had been dislodged after nightfall. The hot sun, beating down all day, had melted enough snow on the upper slopes to saturate the earth, and release the boulder.

"We could have been right there when it landed," he observed, as we went on, "Or we could have been stalled a couple miles back."

As we entered a cleared wide space, I glanced across the ravine. The opposite wall reflected a sickly glow. "Whoever's on the way behind us probably has enough clearance, with your car jammed against the bank," I remarked. And then, noticing that the light did not shift, I added, "The reflection of your headlights. Walked off and left them on."

"Count on me for that. Favorite trick."

Though mists obscured the clearing ahead, I could distinguish the dark bulk of two lodges. The roofs had a steep pitch, to keep them from collapsing during the heavy snows. We were at the edge of a small upland meadow which reached from the rim of the ravine to the nearby foot of the heights which towered over it.

"The first place is Ron's lodge," Wayland said. "Our timing has been a bit too good. I hate to barge in so early, but waiting in this damned mist is no treat."

"Suppose I go back and snap off the lights before the battery's run down," I proposed. "While you rout him out. It'd be better that way, than having me at your

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heels. At the best, he'll be surprised to see you, and whatever you two have to say will be none the worse for having it between yourselves."

I had scarcely turned when he said, "We forgot the drum. Something else you can tend to."

WHATEVER happened, I told myself, that devil's drum was not going to survive. Engrossed with this thought, I retraced my way as far as the buttress which marked the beginning of the meadow shelf before I noticed the rattle and patter of rock fragments. Then a big chunk thumped down to the springy earth, and rolled to within a few yards of me. A crash helmet would come in handy, it seemed.

I turned and called to Wayland, "Watch out!"

But he had already stopped. Though little more than a dark splotch in the early gray, his posture made it clear that something other than my words had warned him. I heard a deep rumbling. He must have sensed the vibration an instant before I had.

The mists shifted and thinned a little. Far up, the snow-packed slopes reflected the first ruddiness of dawn. An acre or more of the mass shifted, so that of a sudden, it no longer mirrored the glow. The rumbling, deep and sullen, increased in volume; but the sound was like that of the stream which roared incessantly in the gorge. Anyone lulled to sleep by it could hardly be aroused by the new and ominous undertone.

I did not know the lay of the land; Wayland did. He knew how much or how little space there was between the two lodges, and the steep slope down which poured a hundred thousand tons of saturated earth sheared off by the pressure of settling snow fields. Surely this must always have been considered a safe spot until now, when a trick of nature had upset all previous estimates. Boulders, freed from the slow-moving mass, thumped down to the meadow. Above, the creeping earth was picking up speed.

The roar was like the sound track of a freight train, enormously magnified and in the tempo of a slow-motion film. Instead of ducking for the shelter of the buttress, I yelled, and ran toward Wayland, as though I had to risk doing what I was sure he would not do. Stumbling over a fragment however sent me sprawling.

"Stay away!" he shouted. "I'll wake him!"

He raced for the lodge. I had landed afoul of an outcropping of rock. Numbed for a moment, I had difficulty in getting up, and when I did regain my feet, I could do little more than grit my teeth and hobble.

Wayland pivoted, wove, evaded a boulder which bounced and went crashing into the ravine. He became a barely visible blur in the mists. Dark against the darkness of the cabin, he vanished entirely from sight. He shouted again. For all his heart-breaking effort, he could not have made himself heard.

I yelled till my throat cracked. I took a few steps forward, then stopped. Wayland could not make it. I was sure he had been knocked down. Then I got a glimpse of him; his motion revealed him. He reached the door.

A lag in the ever-deepening rumble allowed me to hear even the rattle of the latch, and his cry, "Ron, get out!"

A late poker game, and a comfortable amount of Bourbon; no wonder Benson and his friends had not turned out already. Wayland was kicking, beating at the door. I began backing away from my relatively safe spot. Instinct drove me, though every moment made me feel as if I myself were in the lodge, and as good as doomed, and paralyzed by the knowledge that there was no escape for me.

Lights blazed from the windows.

The seconds dragged eternally.

A long path of light reached out as the door opened. Two figures were outlined by the glow. One was a woman. I caught only the momentary twinkle of white arms, the glint of silk, the gleam of hair—

The light winked out, and the meadow quivered. I could barely distinguish the crash and splintering of the sturdy lodge as it was engulfed by the dark flood and ground to bits by the boulders which were part of the flow.

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The edge of the slide moved slowly now, as the pressure behind it subsided. The further lodge still stood, untouched. Benson's had blended into the black mass which stopped a few yards short of the ravine's lip.

Neither Wayland nor Benson nor that woman, whoever she may have been, could possibly have survived. If by some miracle any shred of life remained in any of them, it would be no blessing either to that survivor, or to anyone who had to see what remained. Nevertheless, I hobbled forward. I had to listen, if only to make sure there was no sheltered pocket from which came a cry for help.

Several trees had survived the dwindling fury of the rush. Timber, squared timber, projected from the slide. I skirted the end, as though the further, the darker side would offer a more promising front. There was now no sound except that of the wind and the stream. Both seemed far away and feeble.

Then, beyond any doubt, there were human voices.

". . . so help me, Dick, I never saw anyone look as downright foolish as you did when a woman turned out instead of Dave and Fred—and then you couldn't believe it was Diane!"

That was all I could grapple with for a moment. That any one, much less all three, could have escaped was too much to be grasped at once; so that while both Wayland and Diane spoke, I could not get what they were saying. The voices seemed far off. My thought was, "I am rather far off myself." Reaction was more of a shock than was having witnessed the actual destruction.

Benson spoke again: "You took the craziest chance, Dick. I'd never have had the nerve. You know—well—everything looks different—I've been stubborn about you two—three *is* a crowd. . . ."

There was a murmuring and a rumbling in my head, as though that devil's drum had begun to sound. I hobbled along the edge of the debris until once more I tuned in on speech. Diane was saying, and with wonder and new life in her voice, "Ron, do you really mean it? It's really the way you want things now?"

". . . No, not trading, not paying, it's just that things look different. . . ."

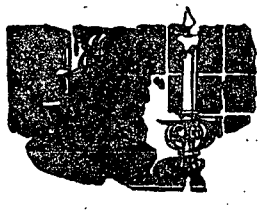
All I saw was three wavering spindles of mist, so much like all the other grayness that I could not have distinguished them had they not been luminous in the manner of phosphorescent flecks in tropical waters, though by no means as bright. There were three vague spindles, and no more speech at all.

After blending into and with each other, they became distinct again, and separate. And by now I understood that I had not actually heard any speech at all; I had perceived thought so strong and vital that it had seemed that there had been spoken words.

Two of the shapes moved closer together, and somewhat apart from the other; and then they, as well as the one from which they had separated, thinned into morning mist.

By the time the debris was cleared away, I had learned that since the Sims brothers had at the last minute been unable to join Benson, Diane had changed her plans and had gone with him; wherefore he and she and Wayland had met for the last time under the shadow of Saturn.

During his final few moments, Wayland had risen from among scorpions to become a Phoenix, winning liberation for him and for Diane, and for Benson as well. And it was not until later, when I burned the devil's drum, that it came to me that Benson had also risen above himself, earning his freedom.



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The Tree's Wife

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

I SMILED at my companion, Hettie Morrison, County Welfare investigator for the Bald Mountain district. When I dropped into her office that morning, mostly to dig up nostalgic old memories of our college days at the University of Virginia, I found her arguing over the telephone with a local mechanic. *"But I have to make a field trip this morning! . . . WHY can't you get the parts? Take them out of somebody else's car! . . . Oh, the devil with what you think wouldn't be right! This family may be starving. . . . !"*

Hettie had hung up, still sputtering, a gaunt severe-looking old maid with a heart as big as the Blue Ridge mountains. She glanced up then, to see me grinning at her, jingling the car-keys of my new club coupe by way of an invitation. We were such close friends, no words were needed—Hettie merely jerked a nod, slammed on her hat, and started out the door with me in tow.

"You'll be sorry," she warned me. "The road I have to take is an old Indian trail—and if they had to get back and forth on

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"One of those Hatfield-and-McCoy things, was it?"

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that, no wonder they're called the Vanishing Americans! You'll break a spring."

I looked so dismayed, pausing to unlock my first new car in ten years, that she closed one eye in a crafty look I knew so well, from days at college when she was about to ask the loan of my best hose.

"It's a dull trip, just routine field work. Of course you wouldn't be interested," she drawled casually, "in Florella Dabney—the girl who married a tree. We pass right by the Dabney place. No, no, dear; you're liable to scratch up that nice blue paint. And Holy Creek crosses the road four times; we'd have to drive through it, hub-deep. I always get stuck and have to——"

I scowled at my old friend, familiar with all her clever tricks of getting her way, but still unable to cope with them.

"Tree?" I demanded. "Did you say—? Married a —?"

"That's right," Hettie nodded with a smug grin. "It's a strange case—almost a legend up around Bald Mountain. Although," she added, blatantly climbing into my car, "it's not without precedent, in the old Greek legends. Zeus was forever turning some girl into a spring or a flower, or some inanimate object, so his wife Hera wouldn't find out about his goings-on. Even as late as the 15th Century, there were proxy weddings, where some queen or other married her knight's sword because he was off at war. Then, there's an African tribe in which the men are married, at puberty, to some tree."

I grimaced impatiently, climbed into the coupe, and started it with a jerk. Hettie had aroused my interest, and well she knew it. She would get her ride over the wild, bushy crest of Bald Mountain—or I would never find out about that girl who married a tree.

AN HOUR later, bouncing over a rocky trail pressed closely on both sides by scrub pine and mountain laurel, she began to tell me about Florella Dabney—and the bloody feud that, a trained psychiatrist might explain, had left her a mental case with a strange delusion.

The Dabneys (Hettie related) had built their cabin and begun to wrest a living out of the side of Bald Mountain about the time of Daniel Boone. Six generations of underfed, overworked mountaineers had lived therein, planting a little, hunting a little, and raising a batch of children as wild as the foxes that made inroads on their chicken supply. Florella was the youngest daughter, a shy willowy child of fifteen, with flowing dark hair and big luminous dark eyes like a fawn. Barefoot, clad in the simple gingham shift that all mountain girls wore, she could be seen running down the steep side of Old Baldy, as nimbly as a city child might run along a sidewalk. Her older brothers and sisters married and moved away, her mother died, and Florella lived with her father now on the sparse farm.

On the other side of the mountain lived another such family of "old settlers," the Jenningses. As far back as anyone could remember, there had been bad blood between the two, starting with a free-for-all over a load of cordwood, which had sent two Dabneys to the hospital and three Jenningses to jail. Both attended the little mountain church perched on the ridge that divided their farms, but no Jennings ever spoke to a Dabney, even at all-day singings, when everyone was pleasantly full of food and "home-brew." No Dabney would sit left of the aisle; and any baptizing that was done in Holy Creek, after a rousing revival meeting, had to be arranged with Jenningses and Dabneys immersed on alternate days. Reverend Posy Adkins, the lay preacher, recognized this as a regrettable but inevitable condition. And that was the law on Bald Mountain—up until the spring evening when Joe Ed Jennings and Florella Dabney "run off together."

WHEN and how they had ever seen enough of each other to fall in love, neither family could imagine. Joe Ed was a stocky blond boy who could play a guitar and shoot the eye out of a 'possum at fifty yards—but not much else. What astonished everyone was Florella's regard for such a do-little, since she was halfway promised to a boy from Owl's Hollow. It was as

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sumed, when a party of hunters saw them streaking through the woods one night, that Florella had been carried off by force, much against her will. She had gone out after one of the hogs, which had strayed. At midnight, when she had not returned, her pa, Lafe Dabney, went out to search for her, ran into the hunting party—and promptly stalked back to his cabin for his rifle.

He was starting out again, with murder in his close-set, mean little eyes, when a pair of frightened young people suddenly walked through the sagging front gate. With them was Preacher Adkins, dressed either for a buryin' or a marryin', with the Good Book clutched in a hand that trembled. But he spoke steadily.

"Lafe, these two young'nes has sinned. But the Lord's likely done forgave 'em already. Now they aim to marry, so don't try an' stop it!"

Without preamble, he motioned for Florella and Joe Ed to stand under a big whiteoak that grew in the front yard, towering over the rough cabin and silhouetted darkly against the moonlit sky. High up on the trunk, if Lafe had noticed, was cut a heart with the initials J. E. J. and F. D.

Solemnly, the old preacher began to intone the marriage ceremony, while Florella's pa stood there staring at them, his lean face growing darker with fury, his tight mouth working. Hardly had the immortal words, *"Do you take this man—?"* been spoken, when he whipped the rifle to his shoulder and fired at Joe Ed, pointblank. The boy was dead as he crumpled up at his bride's small bare feet.

"I'll larn you to go sparkin' our girl behind my back!" Lafe roared. "You triflin' no-account!"

He never finished, for a second shot rang out in the quiet night. Lafe Dabney pitched forward on his face, crawled across the body of his prospective son-in-law, and fired twice toward the powder flash in the woods beyond the cabin. A moment later, all hell broke loose. It seems that Reverend Adkins had expected just such a blow-up. Someone had carried the news to Joe Ed's pa. Clem Jennings had also hastened to the spot, to stop the wedding. The old preacher, fearing this, had notified "the law." The sheriff, with a hastily gathered posse, had showed up at the moment when Lafe and Clem fired at each other, over the body of young Joe Ed and the prostrate sobbing form of his near-bride.

IN A MATTER of minutes, the posse had both fathers handcuffed and hauled off to jail. But, behind them, they left a tragic tableau—little Florella weeping over the body of her lost lover, with old Reverend Adkins standing dumbly in the background. Two of the posse had stayed behind to help with Joe Ed's body, which the weeping girl had begged the preacher to bury, then and there, "under our tree." It was there Joe Ed had first caught her and kissed her, holding his hand over her mouth and laughing, with Lafe not ten yards away. It was there, in the night, that she had first told him she loved him—and promised to slip away with him, into the deep silent woods of Old Baldy, for a lover's tryst forbidden by both their families. It was there, months later, terrified and ashamed, that she had sobbed out to him that she was with child. She knew there was nothing left but to kill herself. Her lover was a Jennings, and she had expected no more from him than a few moments of wild secret ecstasy.

But Joe Ed had surprised her. Fiercely protective and loyal, he had announced that, the following night, he would stand with her under the tree in the Dabney's yard, and have Preacher Adkins marry them—right in front of old Lafe. His child must bear his name, the boy said proudly and tenderly, and he hoped it would be a fawn-eyed little girl exactly like Florella.

All this old Preacher Adkins related to the two members of the posse, while they took turns digging a grave for Joe Ed Jennings—at the foot of the big whiteoak under which he was to have been married. Florella stood numbly by, watching and no longer crying, like a trapped animal at last resigned to its bitter fate.

But, regarding her, the old lay-preacher suddenly remembered a story from his school

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days, a myth, a legend. Walking over to the girl, he took her hand quietly and led her over to the tree, where the two pitying neighbors were just patting the last spadeful of dirt over Joe Ed's crude grave.

"Daughter," the old preacher said, "I've heard tell of queens in the old days marryin' a sword that belonged to some feller that'd been killt in battle. Now, Joe Ed, he'd want you should go ahead and take his name—so I'm goin' t' make out like this-here tree is Joe Ed, him bein' buried underneath it. I want you two men," he faced the gravediggers solemnly, "to witness this-here marryin'—of Joe Ed Jennings and Florella Dabney." He raised his eyes humbly. "If hit's a wrong thing I'm doin', punish me, Lord. If hit's right, bless this-here ceremony!"

There in the moonlit night, the old preacher proceeded with that strange proxy wedding of a girl to a tree. The two members of the posse stood by, wide-eyed and amazed, as they heard Reverend Adkins repeat the familiar words of the marriage ceremony. Heard Florella's sobbing replies. And then heard—was it only wind in the great tree towering above them? Or was it——? Both men later swore that what they heard sounded like a whispering voice. A man's voice, Joe Ed's, coming from the depths of those thick green branches. But (as Hettie remarked drily) it had been a hysterical night, and hysteria can play weird tricks on the human senses numerous times.

"WELL? That isn't *all*?" I demanded, as my car lurched madly into Holy Creek's third crossing and plunged wetly out again. "What happened to the girl? With her father in prison, who looked after her while——? Was the child all right?"

"Slow down, you idiot!" Hettie snapped at me pleasantly, clinging to the car door on her side. "Yes, of course, the child was all right. A little girl. I had Welfare send a doctor out there, when we got the message that Florella was in labor. She had been living on in her father's cabin, quite alone—for the simple reason that all her relatives and all of Joe Ed's were afraid to come near the place!"

I frowned, puzzled. "Why?"

"Because of the tree," Hettie said blandly. "Word got around that it was haunted. That Joe Ed had 'gone into that oak' and—well, that it was alive. Sentient, that is. That it—didn't behave like a tree any more. I must say—*look out for that rock, you goose! Want to wreck this thing?*—I must say some of the things that happened were—odd, to say the least!"

I slowed down obediently, picking my way over the rocky road. Anything to keep Hettie on the story that had so captured my imagination!

"What things?" I demanded. "Anybody can hear voices in the wind. Leaves rustling. Branches rubbing together."

"But," Hettie drawled, "just anybody can't see a tree catch a live rabbit, or a dove that has lit on a branch of it. Just anybody can't——"

"*What?*" I gaped at her. "I never heard of anything so ridiculous!" My attempted laugh sounded flat, however, even to my own ears. "How on earth could——?"

"Don't ask me," Hettie said cheerfully. "All I know is, the lower branch of that big whiteoak kept Florella supplied with meat. Rabbits, doves, once a 'possum. They—they got choked, someway. Got their necks caught in the twigs. She'd find them there, all ready to be cooked and eaten. The way any good mountaineer might trap to feed his family. So she got to believing—that *he* caught them. Joe Ed had quite a reputation as a hunter and trapper."

"Good Lord!" I tried to laugh again. "You're not hinting—? The poor kid," I broke off pityingly. "But an experience like that would naturally affect her mind. Living there all alone, too, with a baby!"

"Then," Hettie went on pleasantly, "there was the fall day, real cold, when a neighbor woman dropped in. Nosey old sister. Just wanted to say something spiteful to Florella about the baby. When she was leaving, though—well," Hettie chuckled, "it seems her coat got tangled in a tree branch that dipped down over the gate. It yanked

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the coat right off her back, the way she told it. She lit out of there, screaming bloody-murder, and told everybody that Joe Ed took her coat for Florella! When the girl tried to return it to her, she wouldn't touch it. Said it wasn't her best coat, anyhow, and she wasn't going to argue with a tree!"

"Oh no!" I shook my head, laughing—but still trying to ignore a small shiver that kept running down my spine. "These mountain people are awfully superstitious, aren't they? Naturally, it was just the woman's fear that made her think——"

"Maybe," Hettie said drily, "but it wasn't fear that snatched my new hat off last spring, when I happened to walk under that tree. Checking up on Florella—she's a hardship case, of course. Yessir," she said in a queer tone. "Big limb swooped down and snatched that bonnet right off my head. I couldn't reach it, and Florella couldn't climb up and get it. Too soon after the baby's arrival; poor girl was still kind of weak. But the way she giggled, and started talking to that tree like it was a person! Honestly, it made my flesh crawl, she was so matter-of-fact about it! 'Joe Ed, you rascal,' she said, 'give Miss Hettie back her bonnet, now! I don't need no fancy clothes. Me and the baby's doin' just fine.'" Hettie peered at me, sheepishly. "Way she said it made me feel like—like a selfish old turkey-gobbler! Besides, a hat like that was too pretty for an old hatchet-face like me. But it did give me a turn, I'll have to admit! When—" she gulped slightly, "when I told Florella she could have the hat, it—it immediately fell out of the tree. Plop! Right smack on that girl's head! I must say," she added crossly, "it was very becoming. Probably the first one she ever owned, poor little thing! Lafe was a stingy old coot; Florella's mother never had a rag she didn't weave herself!"

I TURNED the steering wheel sharply to avoid a raccoon ambling across the trail. Then I peered at Hettie.

"Go on," I said grimly. "Tell me how the tree shed its wood in stacks, so Florella wouldn't have to chop any!"

Hettie chuckled. "Oh, no. Mountain men take it for granted that their wives must work like mules. All they do is feed 'em, shelter 'em, and protect 'em—with an occasional pretty thrown in when they feel in a generous mood. That's what Florella expected from her tree-husband, and that's what she got. Though I suppose a psychologist would say her delusion gave her a sense of security that merely made her able to fend for herself. Lots of people need a crutch for their self-confidence—if it's only a lucky coin they carry around. Coincidence and superstition, hm?"

"Well," my friend smiled, "I *am* obliged to you for the lift. We had a message that Kirby Marsh, a farmer who lives near the Dabney plae, got in a fight with somebody and crawled home, pretty banged up. His wife is bed-ridden, so they'll need help if he's seriously injured. You were a life-saver to bring me. *This is the turn;*" she broke off abruptly, grinning at me with a sly twinkle in her eye. "The Dabney farm is just around this bend."

I slowed down, feeling again that cold shiver run down my spine as we rounded the curve. An old cabin of square-hewn logs perched on the mountainside a few yards above the road, with the usual well in the yard and the usual small truck-garden in back. A huge whiteoak towered over the gate of a sagging rail fence. Its sturdy trunk leaned a bit toward the house in a curiously protective manner, shading the worn front stoop with its thick dark-green foliage.

I braked the car outside the gate, and Hettie grinned at my expression.

"There it is," she announced drily. "There's where the girl lives who married a tree. And that's the tree. That's *him.*"

I got out of the coupe and walked warily up to the gate. Hettie climbed out stiffly, and called, in her pleasantly harsh voice:

"Hello? Hello the house?" in traditional mountain-style.

THERE was no answer, but all at once I saw a quilt pallet spread under the oak Hettie had indicated as "*him.*" A fair-

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haired baby girl was sprawled on the folded quilt, gurgling and cooing. She looked to be about two years old, with the sturdy good health of most mountain children, despite their skimpy diet and constant exposure to the elements.

I stood watching her for a moment, charmed by the picture she made. Then I frowned.

"She's too young to be left alone," I muttered. "Where's her mother?"

"Oh, out picking blackberries, I guess." Hettie shrugged. "Josie's all right, though. Her father's minding her," she added with another impish grin at my expression. "Hello!" she called again. "Florella!"

At that moment a lovely slender girl came running around the house, her feet bare, her dark hair flying. There was a sprig of laurel over her ear, and blackberry stains on her brown fingers. I stared at her, thinking how like a dryad she looked—wild, free, and happily unafraid.

"Oh! Howdy, Miss Hettie!" she greeted my friend warmly. "Come in and set. Who's that with ye? Kinfolk?"

Hettie introduced me as a school chum, with no mention of the fact that I wrote stories of the supernatural for my bread and butter. We entered the gate, and Hettie stooped over to pat the baby, proffering a peppermint from the endless supply she always seems to carry around. I fidgeted beside her, at a loss for conversation with this pretty normal-looking young mother who, from all Hettie had told me, was as crazy as a coot. Once, nervously, I started as a limb of the great tree under which we stood brushed my shoulder, plucking at my scarf. On impulse, I took it off and gave it to the girl, who beamed and thanked me shyly, then tied it proudly around her own neck. I caught Hettie's eye at that moment—and flushed as she grinned, winked, and glanced up at the giant tree.

Then she turned to Florella, lovelier than ever in my blue chiffon scarf—and with no more madness in her face than in mine.

"I got word that Kirby Marsh was hurt in a fight," my friend said conversationally. "Anybody over there looking after his wife and kids? Heard the doctor came, and took Kirby to the hospital with concussion and a sprained shoulder. Must have been some fight, to have——"

Hettie broke off, noticing the girl's sudden expression of regret beyond the politeness expected of a neighbor. Florella ducked her head suddenly, with a rueful little smile.

"Yes, ma'am," she said simply. "He come over here to our place late last night, and went to pesterin' me. Oh, not that Kirby ain't a real nice feller," she apologized for her neighbor gently, "exceptin' when he's likkered up. I told him to leave go o' me," she added with wifely dignity. "Told him Joe Ed wouldn't like it. But he wouldn't listen. So I run out to Joe Ed, with it a-stormin' awful. He'd been a-bangin' on the roof, to warn Kirby, but he likely thought 'twas only the wind."

I gulped, wracked with pity, and threw a glance at my friend.

"Then—?" Hettie prompted softly, in an odd tone. "You ran out into the yard? Kirby ran after you, and——?"

"And Joe Ed, he whanged him over the head," the girl finished, half apologetic, half proud, as any other woman might speak of a husband who had stoutly defended her honor. "He like to busted Kirby's skull wide open. But he hadn't ought to've tried to kiss me," she defended primly. "Ought he, Miss Hettie? And me a married woman with a young'ne!"

"No, dear," Hettie answered, in the gentlest voice I have ever heard her use. "No—Joe Ed did the right thing. I don't think Kirby was badly injured, but somebody has to look after his folks while he's in the hospital. Did you go over and see his wife today?"

"Yes ma'am," the girl said quietly. "But they wouldn't let me in. I reckon, on account they was scared. I mean, of Joe Ed. But he wouldn't hurt nobody less'n they was botherin' me or the baby! He's real good-hearted."

"Yes," my friend said softly. "I understand. Well—don't worry about it, dear. Next time Kirby will know better! I rather

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imagine," she chuckled, "that this experience will keep him sober for some time!"

The girl nodded shyly, and bent to pick up the child. But small Josie toddled away from her and ran around the great tree to where a low limb dipped almost to the ground.

"Pa!" she chirped suddenly, holding up her chubby arms to the giant oak. "Fing baby! Fing *high,* Pa!"

Florella laughed, shaking her head mildly and calling: "No! *No,* now, Joe Ed —you're liable to drop that young'un! Don't ye——"

But as I stared, that low limb dipped down as under unseen pressure. The child, Josie, seized it and, as I gasped at the spectacle, was tossed ten feet off the ground, as if a gust of wind had blown the branch skyward, it had scooped up the baby, swinging her high above us. Then, as gently, it set her down again, while the young mother shook her head again in laughing reproof. My scalp crawled at her matter-of-fact, unself-conscious manner.

"Joe Ed's always a-doin' that," she said pleasantly. "She loves it. Why, Miss Hettie!" she broke off, pouting as I sidled pointedly back toward the gate, "I thought you-all would stay for dinner! Joe Ed caught me a rabbit, and I was just fixin' to fry it real nice and brown. Cain't ye stay?"

But I was out the gate and climbing into my car by that time, shaking my head covertly and beckoning for Hettie to come away. For some reason—which I will always firmly deny—my teeth were clicking like castanets. And I kept glancing up nervously at that tall spreading oak tree, brooding over the little mountain cabin, and the woman and child who lived there alone.

Alone—?

"Pitiful case, isn't it?" Hettie murmured cheerfully, as she climbed into the car and waved goodbye to Florella Dabney—or "Mrs. Joseph Edward Jennings," as she was listed in the Welfare files. "I mean," my friend expanded, "the way that poor girl lives, with her baby. From hand to mouth, and the prey of—well, men like Kirby. She'd be so lonely and frightened if it weren't for that pathetic delusion of hers. And she's got the child to believing it now! Guess you noticed her swinging on that tree—she called it *'Pa!'* Stout branch, to pick up a child that heavy, wasn't it?" she drawled carelessly. "Wind blew it, I guess —like the other night, when it whacked Kirby Marsh over the head. Awful windy up here on Old Baldy." She peeked at me slyly, lips twitching.

I glared at her and stepped on the gas, aware of the cold perspiration that had sprung out on my forehead. Because it was not windy. It was close and very still—and beside me, Hettie was chuckling softly as I glanced back at the barren little farm. Except for one low limb of that giant oak tree—again tossing that happy child playfully into the air while its mother looked on; lifting it gently, like a man's strong protective arms—not a leaf was stirring as far as we could see over the rugged mountainside.

They were married at 10 o'clock, and by afternoon the djinn had come out of the bottle. . . . . .

"Djinn and Bitters"

By HAROLD LAWLOR

in our next issue

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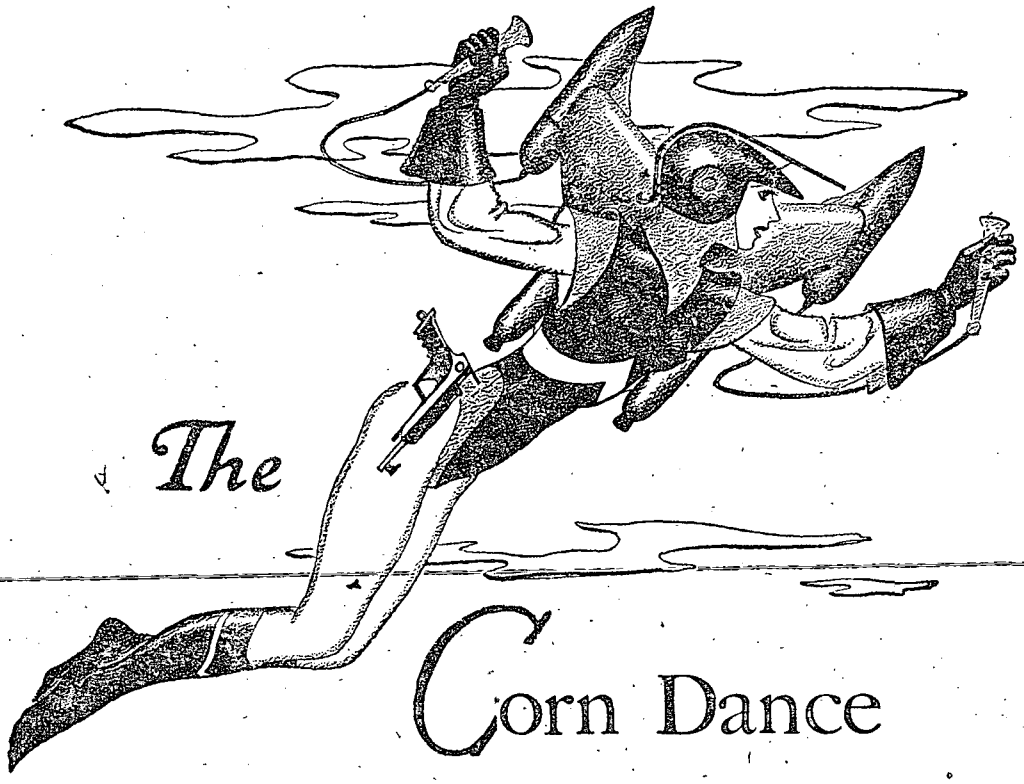

The Corn Dance

By Margaret St. Clair

"NOT any more," the commissioner for the Dindone said. "Visitors used to be admitted to the Corn Dance, yes. But not any more." He looked a little apprehensively at the woman to whom the Governor's aide had just presented him.

Mrs. Sinott raised her darkened eyebrows prettily at him. "But why not?" she asked. "Weren't the visitors sufficiently respectful? I can assure you that that's not one of my failings! If the Dindone took offense at that—" She pushed back the bracelets which held the folds of her mauve-spangled cloak to her arms, and smiled at him.

"Oh, the Dindone didn't object," the commissioner said. "That wasn't the reason." He looked down into the depths of his liquor glass, swirling it about so that the purple bubbles rose in a soft cloud through the golden liquid, and frowned. "As far as that goes, the Corn Dance is sufficiently impressive that almost anyone, watching it, would adopt a respectful attitude. But the Dindone aren't human, you see."

"Not human?" Mrs. Sinott echoed with increased interest. "I didn't realize that. Then they don't interbreed?"

Commissioner Harris flushed faintly. "Never," he answered stiffly. He might have been resentful, or embarrassed, or, perhaps, suffering from an emotion more complex than either of these. "I mean—almost never. In all the time since humanoids first landed on this planet, there has been only one mating between a member of the Dindone and one of ourselves. To anyone who knows them, that exception is almost incredible. No, they don't interbreed with us."

"But why not?" Mrs. Sinott asked. "I've

Remote as was her body from the earthly visitor, it felt itself terrified

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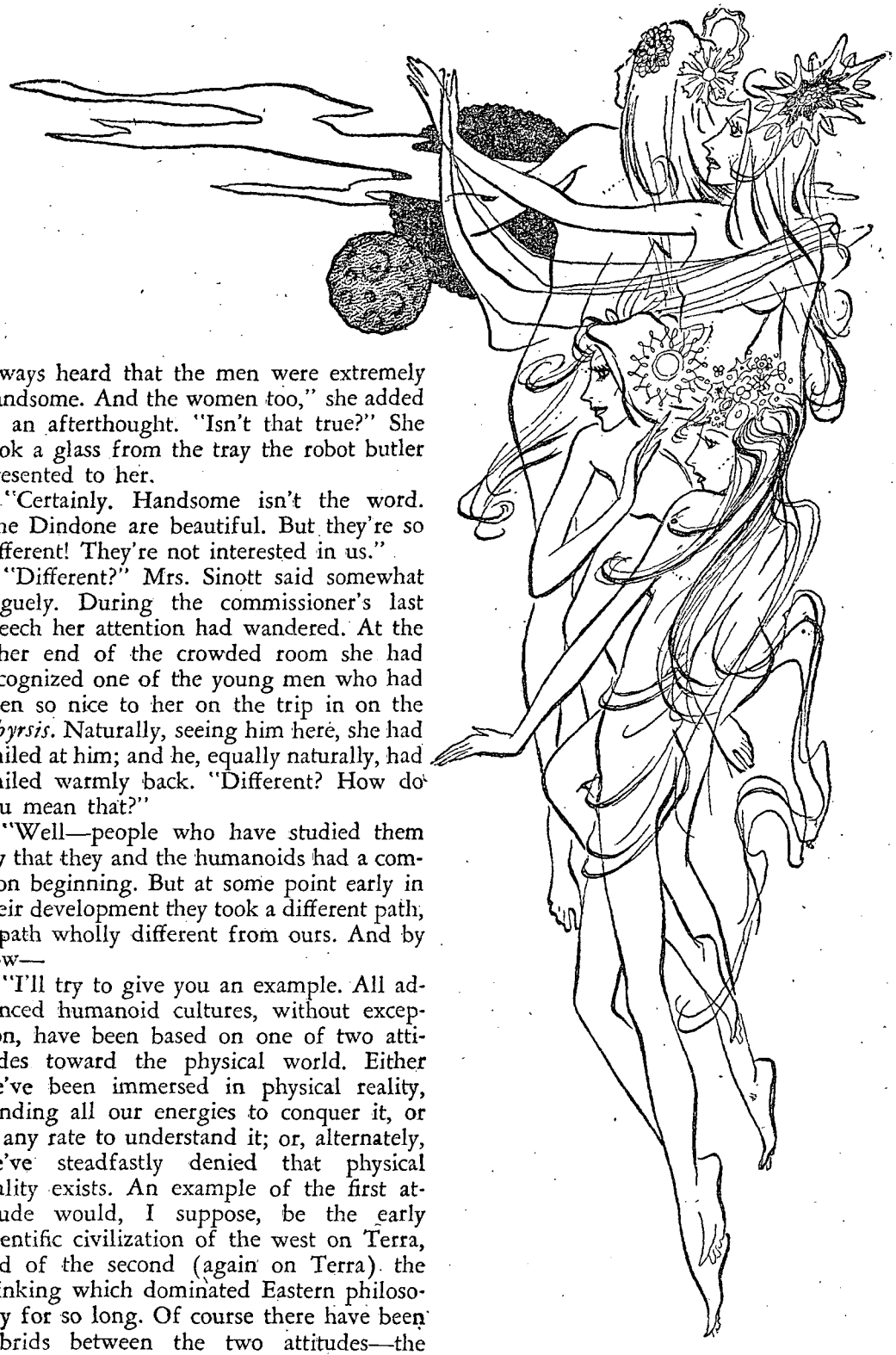

always heard that the men were extremely handsome. And the women too," she added as an afterthought. "Isn't that true?" She took a glass from the tray the robot butler presented to her.

"Certainly. Handsome isn't the word. The Dindone are beautiful. But they're so different! They're not interested in us."

"Different?" Mrs. Sinott said somewhat vaguely. During the commissioner's last speech her attention had wandered. At the other end of the crowded room she had recognized one of the young men who had been so nice to her on the trip in on the *Thyrsis*. Naturally, seeing him here, she had smiled at him; and he, equally naturally, had smiled warmly back. "Different? How do you mean that?"

"Well—people who have studied them say that they and the humanoids had a common beginning. But at some point early in their development they took a different path, a path wholly different from ours. And by now—

"I'll try to give you an example. All advanced humanoid cultures, without exception, have been based on one of two attitudes toward the physical world. Either we've been immersed in physical reality, bending all our energies to conquer it, or at any rate to understand it; or, alternately, we've steadfastly denied that physical reality exists. An example of the first attitude would, I suppose, be the early scientific civilization of the west on Terra, and of the second (again on Terra) the thinking which dominated Eastern philosophy for so long. Of course there have been hybrids between the two attitudes—the Martian theocratic dynasties are an instance.

Heading by Boris Dolgov

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"The psychologists tell us that both attitudes are basically the same—that the cultures which deny the ultimate reality of the physical world are actually as much concerned with it as are those which immerse themselves in it.

"The attitude of the Dindone is so different that it's hard to describe. It's an acceptance. What we've either submerged ourselves in, or fought against, they take as naturally as you take the beating of your heart. And, accepting it, they can do strange things with it. As I said before, they're on a different path."

"How *interesting*!" Mrs. Sinott breathed. It is to be feared that her attention had wandered even more than previously, but she smiled up at Harris quite as brightly as if she had been listening. "You explain it so well! But really, Mr. Harris, I can't see why their being different from us means that I can't see them do the Corn Dance."

THE commissioner swallowed. "Nearly twenty years ago," he said, "it was decided that no humanoids should be allowed in direct contact with the Dindone except council members. And, of course, the commissioner himself. The order's been renewed twice since then. I don't think it will ever be revoked."

"Goodness!" Mrs. Sinott said. She made an attractive little face. "No one? Not even a harmless little person like me? The Dindone must be terribly bloodthirsty!"

"Not at all," the commissioner answered. His lean, dark face had grown rather grim. "They're quite harmless in themselves. But it's plain—it's really unmistakable—that they've reached a critical point in their development. Since they're not humanoid, we can't even guess what the next stage will be. Something violent might happen. Like the reaction of water and metallic sodium. It seems better to keep them and humanoids apart."

"Sodium?" cried Mrs. Sinott, charmingly puzzled. She tipped her head to one side; the gesture brought out the apricot lights in her hair and made the diamond-white gems of her headband send out a thousand darts and sparkles of mauve and magenta light. "Dear Mr. Harris, I'm afraid the chemical side of my education was neglected scandalously. But surely you could make an exception to the rules. Since the Dindone are not dangerous, I mean. Just for me."

The commissioner's dark face grew even more saturnine. "I'm afraid not," he said heavily. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Sinott. I've enjoyed meeting you. But it's impossible."

Mrs. Sinott was not disposed to give up so easily. She knew people who knew people who knew people (a concatenation which obtains, apparently, no matter what the social order may be), and she was not adverse to calling on them. She began sending grams from her suite in the hotel in Narid. Two weeks after the reception at the Governor's house Harris got an I. P. gram signed Yablinki. The gram asked him to do everything in his power to make Mrs. Sinott's stay on Darril enjoyable.

Harris did not think it politic to reply without taking the matter up with the council. They confirmed his stand without discussion. And the next day Harris sent a very polite gram to Yablinki in which he regretted exceedingly that it was impossible to gratify Mrs. Sinott's natural desire to witness the Dindone Corn Dance. The council considered it quite inadvisable to allow humanoid contact with the Dindone, for the visitors' own sake. Meanwhile, if there were anything else he could do—

A copy of the gram reached Mrs. Sinott four or five days later at the hotel. She read it frowningly, while one foot tapped, and when she had finished reading it she tore it into many pieces and tossed them into the disposer contemptuously. She was accustomed to getting her way. For a while she sat thinking, her robe of amethystine mirafloss pulled tightly about her. Then she went to the videophone.

THE first difficulty was that the Corn Dance, upon inquiry, appeared to have no fixed date. It could be given at any time between the fifteenth and the twenty-first of the current Darrilan month (Mrs. Sinott refused even to try to remember the month's outlandish name). What determined the Dindone to select one day for the dance

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rather than another was apparently known only to them. This meant that Mrs. Sinott, if she wished to be sure of not missing the dance, would have to be on the ground during the whole six days.

The second difficulty was transportation. According to the atlas, the settlement of humanoids nearest to the Dindone territory (a place called Borra, pop. 1,350) was more than twelve kilometers away from it. This was a longer distance than Mrs. Sinott had ever walked in her life; and she considered it inadvisable to try to hire someone locally to fly her there.

After some consideration Mrs. Sinott began to drop hints to her current nice young men regarding the niceness and general desirability of having a male companion on any expedition which could be classed as venturesome. The nice young men responded to these suggestions with their usual alacrity at first; but as Mrs. Sinott became more explicit they showed a disappointing tendency to fade discreetly away, though they took care, in all cases, to soften the blow of their withdrawal with numerous boxes of ornate sweets and cartons of exotic and expensive flowers.

Mrs. Sinott frowned over these defections savagely and then ran for her mirror and the jar of anti-wrinkle cream. In the end she took the air bus for Borra, all alone, on the night of the fourteenth. In her baggage there was a compact anti-grav harness for which she had had to pay altogether too many interplanetary notes. Her lips were compressed, and her expression was resolute.

She left the hostel at Borra on the morning of the fifteenth. The anti-grav harness made a slight bulge under the intricate drapery of her greige coat. In her hand case was a supply of her favorite cosmetics, a box of food tablets, a number of interplanetary notes of high denominations, and a small, pretty certainly illegal, hand blaster. She was prepared for anything. All the same, her heart was beating rather fast when she turned the switch on the anti-grav. And from time to time, as she floated effortlessly along (her weight was now under ten kilograms), she drew a quavering breath that was almost a sigh.

The country was pretty—high, rolling parkland with clumps of big blue-leaved trees. The light of Darril's double sun was agreeably warm. But the twelve kilometers stretched out into seventeen and the country grew brown and bare before Mrs. Sinott saw anything which might have been the dwelling houses of the Dindone. Then she paused, and a blank disconcerted expression came over her face.

The buildings themselves were odd enough. They were aimless structures with walls angled like the stems of plants and intricately puckered, convoluted roofs. But what had discomposed Mrs. Sinott was not the buildings themselves but their entire lack of what a humanoid would consider arrangement. None of the considerations which would govern the groupings of a humanoid settlement—convenience, mutual protection, sociability, or even aesthetics—had been consulted here. The houses of the Dindone had been located, seemingly, as arbitrarily as a handful of pebbles which a man had cast upon the ground.

Mrs. Sinott bit her lower lip. Then she collected herself. "He told me they were different," she murmured. She moved on.

YEARS ago, when Mrs. Sinott had still been in the nursery, she and her brother had invented a game, based on a favorite book, which they called "Venusians." The game involved a great deal of spying and skulking and lurking about. When Mrs. Sinott grew up she discovered that the game (and the book too) represented a grave injustice to the actual inhabitants of Venus, but she had learned one thing from it: that if you want to come up on someone unobserved, the best way to do it is to move forward slowly and steadily for a short distance and then wait, absolutely motionless, until any suspicion roused by your recent activity has had time to die down. She turned off her anti-grav and prepared to follow this principle in her advance on the Dindone.

Her periods of progress were short, the waits between them long and wearisome. But at last she was close enough to one of the peculiarly-angled walls to take cover

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under it. Her greige coat, carefully chosen, blended in well with the prevailing color of the wall. Trembling a little from muscular fatigue, she seated herself and composed herself to wait.

From where she was sitting she could see most of the other buildings. People were moving about, but at such a distance that they were no more than dots. The double sun rose higher in the heavens.

ABRUPTLY there was a slap-slap of sandled feet near her hiding place. Mrs. Sinott jumped and gripped her hand case defensively, but she need not have been afraid. The person was obviously going past without seeing her. Very cautiously Mrs. Sinott put her head around the angle and looked. She saw her first Dindone.

At sight of him Mrs. Sinott felt an odd electrical thrill, half-stimulating, half-unpleasant, like the touch of a rapidly-flowing, chilly stream. The sensation was so strong that she felt surprise when the Dindone did not look round at her. But he went past obliviously, and Mrs. Sinott sank back in the corner of the wall to collate her impressions.

He had been a tall, well-made man, slender in spite of his bulk, with glossy black hair. His skin had been an intense cold white, much whiter than that of even the most bleached members of the light-skinned races of earth. His lips were a dark brownish red, his eyes the color of warm carnelian. As far as Mrs. Sinott had been able to judge through his filmy tunic, he approximated in every respect to the human male. The totality of these details was a great, an extreme, comeliness; but Mrs. Sinott would never have dreamed of classing the Dindone as a nice young man.

After a moment she opened her hand case and began to make up her face, but she did it half-heartedly. She understood now why Harris had said that interbreeding with them was so rare.

Time passed. Mrs. Sinott lunched on food pills. About the middle of the afternoon she saw a group of the Dindone coming toward the building where she sat. The women's varicolored tunics made them look like moving flowers. The Dindones were—talking?—to each other as they walked, in flute-like voices that rippled up and down the scale and sent out sparkling cascades of notes. It was extremely pretty to listen to, but Mrs. Sinott had the feeling that their speech would prove as basically unintelligible to a human being as the singing of birds.

Mrs. Sinott considered the situation for a moment—had that Dindone seen her, after all?—and then began to back around the angle cautiously. She had not moved backward three paces when a soft, strong noose settled around her shoulders and pinned her upper arms to her sides.

Her heart beating painfully, Mrs. Sinott spun round. The man (she used the word provisionally) who held the end of the cordage in his hand was handsome, but his temples were touched with a light sprinkling of gray. He was, incidentally, the only Dindone Mrs. Sinott was ever to see who was otherwise than in the first flush of vigorous youth.

"Ah, a human being," he said, forming the syllables a little stiffly. "You have come to visit us?" He smiled at her.

Mrs. Sinott said nothing. At sight of him that electrical tingle had swept over her icily, and by now she was struggling breast deep in it. She was afraid, and growing more afraid.

"Can't you talk?" the man asked with a touch of solicitude. "Oh, I suppose you're frightened." He lingered a little over the word as though what it meant were strange to him. "Did you come to see the Corn Dance?"

Mrs. Sinott licked her lips. Her arms were pinned to her sides, but she still had her hand case, and she had been stealthily working with the catch. The blaster—if she could get it out——

What was it Harris had said? Water, and sodium. Yes, the blaster. Triumphantly she extracted it.

The man looked down at her moving hand and smiled. "It won't go off, you know," he said gently, as if speaking to a child.

"Oh, won't it?" Mrs. Sinott said. De-

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liberately she raised the blaster and fired.

Nothing happened. She stood looking down at her powerless weapon, too amazed to be afraid.

"It won't go off because I don't want it to," the man said in explanation. "Here they come."

Mrs. Sinott turned round again. The approaching group of the Dindone was almost up to her now; and she saw, now that they were close, that their arms were hung with garlands and wreaths and their hands were full of flowers.

At sight of them Mrs. Sinott relaxed involuntarily. Different they were, but so beautiful! And they were smiling at her, laughing with pleasure. She still felt the electrical tingle, but its nature had changed. The warning in her brain was dying away, leaving in its place an icy elation, a bubbling, cold delight.

Standing about her the Dindone hung her with garlands, put wreaths about her head, filled her hands with soft flowers. She was half smothered under them. Involuntarily, Mrs. Sinott began to smile.

"That's better," the man who had spoken to her first said. "Now you're not afraid any more. Did you come to see us, to see the Corn Dance?"

"Yes," Mrs. Sinott answered. It was the first calm word she had spoken. "Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. We are glad. You are welcome. You shall be our honored guest."

He motioned to two of the young men. They stepped forward, joined their hands to make a chair. Loaded with flowers, cradled on their arms, Mrs. Sinott was carried in triumph to one of the houses to rest.

TWO days later the commissioner came to visit her. "You've got to get out," he said without preamble.

Mrs. Sinott studied him lazily. She was lying on a most comfortable couch, her hands clasped under her head. The Dindone had clothed her in a highly becoming tunic of gauzy mauve. She felt disinclined to move. "Why?" she asked after a moment.

"Because it's dangerous," the commissioner answered. He looked down at her darkly. His lean face seemed to sag in heavy folds.

"Oh, nonsense! The Dindone have been exceedingly kind to me. They're a fascinating people. You can't convince me they mean me any harm."

"No, they don't mean you any harm. But you may get hurt all the same. Don't you feel it? Haven't you felt that peculiar tension when they look at you? Something is going to happen, something extraordinary, and you're the catalyst. Or rather, more accurately, you're one of the elements in a chemical reaction. A catalyst isn't changed. And you may be.

"Give it up. Go on back while you can. What's the Corn Dance to you?"

"Give it up?" Mrs. Sinott replied indignantly. "After all the trouble I had getting here? After staying in that wretched hostel in Borra overnight? Certainly not."

The commissioner sighed. "Why are you so determined to see the dance?" he asked with a hint of curiosity. "What's it to you, after all?"

Mrs. Sinott shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Put it down to a woman's whim, to natural stubbornness," she answered lightly. "Or, if you want the exact truth, I'll tell you. I want to see the Corn Dance so I can talk about it after I get back. It's an experience very few terrestrials can have had. The dance is something really worthwhile. To put it crudely, having seen it would add to my social prestige."

"So the Corn Dance is a matter of social prestige," Harris said somberly. "That's a human being for you! Look here, I know what a pretense you make of being brainless and frivolous. But you're really a highly intelligent woman who uses a mask of frivolity to get just what she wants. Aren't you intelligent enough to recognize the danger here?"

Mrs. Sinott looked at him, now, quite seriously. "Yes, I am intelligent," she answered slowly. "You must be intelligent yourself, to have realized it. Most men don't. But I know one thing about you you don't know yourself. It isn't solicitude for me that brings you here. Even though you think it is. It's something else. It's jealousy."

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"Jealousy!" the commissioner said. He almost spat the word at her.

Mrs. Sinott nodded. "Yes, jealousy. Somehow, in some way, I've got something you want. That's why you're trying to get me to leave before I see the Corn Dance. It's jealousy. I shan't do what you ask, because your judgment is warped. You're sick with jealousy. You're eaten up by it."

The commissioner said nothing for a while. His brown hands twisted in each other. "Then you won't leave?" he asked in a tone which was almost pleading.

"No." She turned her face to the angled wall. After a while the commissioner left.

THE Dindone came for her the next day to watch the Corn Dance. They hung her with flowers, far more richly than before, and led her out into one of the fields. It was the month after harvest, and the fields were all brown and bare. The time was nearly noon.

Mrs. Sinott had expected to be allowed to witness the dance from one side, but the dancers formed around her, a man and woman alternately, in an ellipse. Their faces were calm and intent.

The ellipse rotated smoothly around its center twice or thrice and then changed magically into a complicated eight-pointed star. The star began to move, not as the ellipse had done, keeping the relative position of dancer to dancer constant and moving as a whole, but by a smooth flowing in and out through the complicated form, so that one dancer was now the apex of a point, now moving inward toward the inner angle, now moving outward to another point. The constant flicker of motion within the fixed star was oddly like the flashing of leaves on a tree or the leaping motion of tongues of flame within a fire. It was a motion charged with cold, laughing vitality. It went on for a long time.

Abruptly, as if at some inaudible signal, the eight dancers who were at that moment on the points of the star shot outward like eight darting particles of light. They went so fast that Mrs. Sinott could hardly believe they were merely running. The dancers who formed the lines inward to the angles moved outward more slowly, at a sedate pace. Those who had formed the apices of the inner angles dropped forward to their knees, stayed there a moment, and then rose and walked slowly away. Within instants the field that had been alive with movement was empty and bare.

The Dindone with the graying temples appeared.

He was completely naked. His nudity did not embarrass Mrs. Sinott—no humanoid female would have so reacted to it—but it set him even farther apart from the world which Mrs. Sinott knew by making him something to which nudity was of no consequence—a bird, a tree, a star. She was almost gasping, almost shuddering, with the familiar icy electrical chill. And where had he come from? One of the houses, surely; but the effect was exactly as if he had materialized on the edge of the field.

HE CAME up to Mrs. Sinott, though without looking at her. He glanced up casually at the double sun, which was directly over head, and then knelt down on the earth. With his right hand he made a little hole in the dust-dry, powdery soil. From his left hand he took a single seed and planted it in the dry earth. Then he stood back.

The dancers were returning. The men stepped forward proudly, heads high, confident and alert. The women lagged behind, advancing with weary, dragging steps. When they were close enough Mrs. Sinott saw with a pang of surprise that the women were weeping bitterly. Their white, beautiful faces were wet with tears.

The women formed a broken star before the spot where the—priest? (one never knew the exact word to apply to the Dindone) had planted the seed. They knelt and covered their faces with their long, dark hair. They were swaying from side to side in their grief, bowed beneath it as by some heavy weight. They were given over to grief without resistance, invaded, possessed by it. And always they kept on weeping, weeping low and hopelessly. Watching them, Mrs. Sinott felt a mysterious sorrow stirring in her own heart. Behind the

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women the men stood proud and erect.

The women's hair was sodden with their tears. By twos and threes they began to take it in heavy handfuls and shake it so that the tears fell from it in a glinting shower upon the parched earth. Mrs. Sinott felt a tight, prickling sensation in her chest. Irrelevantly it occurred to her that she had never seen a Dindone who was less than full-grown. There must be children, but they had remained invisible. She took her eyes from the still-weeping women and looked intently at the ground.

There was a faintest possible stirring in the soil. After a long moment there was a flicker of green. A young plant had appeared.

Without surprise, wrapped in a cold, remote elation, Mrs. Sinott watched it grow. Under the blue sky, under the broad clear light of noon, its stem grew taller and it put on green leaves. Mrs. Sinott would have recognized it as a stalk of abrissa, the chief food plant of Darril, had she known more botany.

The women rose slowly to their feet. They tossed back their hair. Now, though faintly, they began to smile. As the plant grew taller, a meter, now two meters high, each woman held out her hand to the man behind her. They moved smoothly into the intricate pattern of the eight-pointed star. And as the star came into perfection, the plant in its center, with an almost visible flash, came into fruit.

The gray-haired Dindone stepped forward and broke off the cluster of pendant, shaking seeds. He held it up for everyone to see. Then he stripped off the seeds from it into his left hand, and pulled the stalk up by the roots.

The dancers dispersed quietly. The gray-haired Dindone came toward Mrs. Sinott, smiling. "I think you did it good," he said, almost shyly. "It never came up so quickly before. What did you think of the Corn Dance?"

Mrs. Sinott swallowed. "I—" she said, and gave up. "I'm glad I saw it," she said, "Shall I go back to Borra now?"

"We would like you to stay and see the rest of the dance."

"The rest? I didn't know it was in two parts."

"Not before. But it is now. We will have the rest of the dance tonight."

THE big Darillan moon was beginning to rise when the gray-templed Dindone came for her. He was clothed now, and wore a single wreath of very sweet-scented flowers in his hair. She gasped when she saw him; he seemed to be brimming over with inhuman cold electrical force. When their eyes met it was like the leaping of a blindingly cold light.

He smiled at her and took her gently by the wrist. At the touch most of Mrs. Sinott's emotion left her. It was replaced by a cool languor, gentle and agreeable, like the coming of untroubled sleep. She followed him docilely when he led her out of the door.

A low chair had been placed for her in an open space between two of the houses. She sat down in it, stretching her feet out in front of her. When the gray-haired priest smiled at her, she smiled quietly back.

The dancers were already waiting. In her new quiescence Mrs. Sinott found it only faintly curious that there were dim circles of radiance about their otherwise uncrowned heads.

They joined hands and began to move about her in a circle, a simple figure after the morning's complexity, like the circling of a child's dance. But as the dance continued Mrs. Sinott perceived, in her cool remoteness, that it was more complex than had appeared. The dancers made, now and again, an odd, stamping, sliding motion with their feet. Its beat was hard for a human ear to follow, twisted and intricate. After a time, as the dancers moved they began to sing.

Their singing voices were very high, just at the limit of audibility, and chillingly, piercingly sweet. At first sound of them Mrs. Sinott felt the electrical tingle, sharp and frightening. It died away gradually, as fear in connection with the Dindone always seemed to die away, and left her full of a dreamy, gentle bliss. At first the singing brought back to her certain happy days out of her first youth, days she thought she had

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forgotten. There was one summer in especial, a time when she had been happier than ever since. Those days she thought had been buried under a heap of lesser ones, but now every minute of them came back to her.

As the Dindone sang on, the past became the present imperceptibly. It was not what had been, but what was, that filled her with yielding delight. The high, choiring voices were weaving a star-shot, unearthly tapestry. And the name of the fabric was happiness.

The pitch of the singing altered. The voices became richer, fuller, and more soft. As the singing continued it seemed to take on a curious life of its own, to become, in some extraordinary way, independent of those who sang. It was growing slowly toward its culmination, the point where it would be a palpable and independent element.

The transformation was accomplished quietly. Mrs. Sinott no longer heard the music; she saw it before her, a swelling, foamless sea. The limitless waters were deepest midnight blue. And she had only to launch herself upon them to receive into her hands the full-orbed, shining globe of ultimate bliss.

It was a long time before she came back to herself. The transcendent delight that lapped her about was like a citadel against whose walls assault and battle beat in vain. And when the attack grew more violent she tried, almost petulantly, to thrust the knowledge of it away from her.

Her body would not be disregarded. Remote as it was from her, it was terrified. With bitter reluctance, as one who yields to a stupid and importunate clamor, Mrs. Sinott came back to it.

How cold it was! Her limbs had an icy, death-like chill. Mrs. Sinott regarded her cold, flaccid body with impersonal distaste. Then as she was united with it again and its terrors became her own, her detachment was shot through with alarm. What had been happening? She collected herself and looked out through her physical eyes.

The moon had almost set, and still the dancers danced. They were singing very softly now. The faint halos of light that had lain around each separate head had flowed into a single shaft, as bright as moonlight. It stretched out from the dancers toward where Mrs. Sinott was sitting, shifting a little as it lay upon the air, a stream of light to which each dancer's head was a tributary. Mrs. Sinott looked at it vacantly. The stream grew more bright. It extended toward Mrs. Sinott and, with an odd effect of groping, passed over her face, her throat. It slid lower, down to her diaphragm.

The touch on her face was a cold tingle, but against her diaphragm it was an uncanny pressure, as if something hard and round, round as an egg, were trying to force itself in. At the touch she knew what had recalled her from her remote self-contained ecstasy. Her body, to its piteous terror, had been subjected then to this same alien assault.

But now it was far worse. The assault from outside might, after all, have been resisted, been sustained. But as the uncanny pressure increased, as it thrust more insistently for entrance, there was an equal pressure from within. Something within Mrs. Sinott's body, something on the other side of the wall of flesh, was trying with equal insistence to get out. Something that, if not her very self, was the undifferentiated essence from which self is built up, was struggling, striving, pressing to get free. "Oh, God," Mrs. Sinott said.

She did not resist; she had nothing to resist with. She was like a city which is betrayed from within. She could do no more than be a spectator at her own destruction. Once or twice her hands moved, and she gasped, before she sank back limply in her chair.

FOR an intolerable moment the matched energies met and strained. There was a final wrench which it seemed must burst the flesh. Then, with an exultant leaping of unleashed force, the awful mating took place. There was a vast efflorescence of wonderful deep blue green light, a light shot through with softly falling golden flares. When the light died away, softly, as if to

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the accompaniment of tender laughter, a great spiral had taken its place. The lowest turn of the vast helix lay almost upon the ground, and it mounted up, coil upon coil of supernal light, into the darkness of the empty sky. The dancers had stopped dancing. It was the end of the Corn Dance.

Mrs. Sinott did not see it. Her face was the blank face of idiocy. And then even that animation left her. Mrs. Sinott would never see anything again. Mrs. Sinott was dead.

The dancers joined hands again. With the gray-haired Dindone as choragus, they circled once around Mrs. Sinott's body and then stepped lightly on to the spiral's lowest coil. About, about they went, stepping securely on nothing more solid than radiance, and with each turn they made, their bodies grew more dim. By the time they reached the topmost coil of the helix, they had quite faded out.

When the last dancer had disappeared the helix began to fade away too. It broke into myriad tiny coruscations which sparkled and shone like a cloud of fireflies blown through the motionless air. Then these too died away and there was nothing left except the dark and empty sky.

Harris, the commissioner for the Dindone, came out from around the corner of the building where he had been watching the Corn Dance. About his head there shone a faint, ambiguous, half-Dindone light. He had been crying; his face was wet with tears.

"They're gone," he said softly to Mrs. Sinott's body. "They're gone. Somewhere. They'll never come back. And you got to be the gateway for them. My own people. You opened the gate.

"Oh, why did it have to be like that? They were my people—half mine—and I loved them so. I'd have given my—soul—to have opened the gate for them. It would have been joy, fulfillment, everything, no matter what happened after after it. But they chose you instead, because you were all human. They're gone now and I'm left."

He began to weep once more, desolately. Then, remembering that he was at least half human, and that human males don't weep, he drew himself up, turned, and with wavering steps began to walk away.

Do We Have To Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong, can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty-nine years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 39 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. L-322, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

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Take the Z Train

BY ALLISON V. HARDING

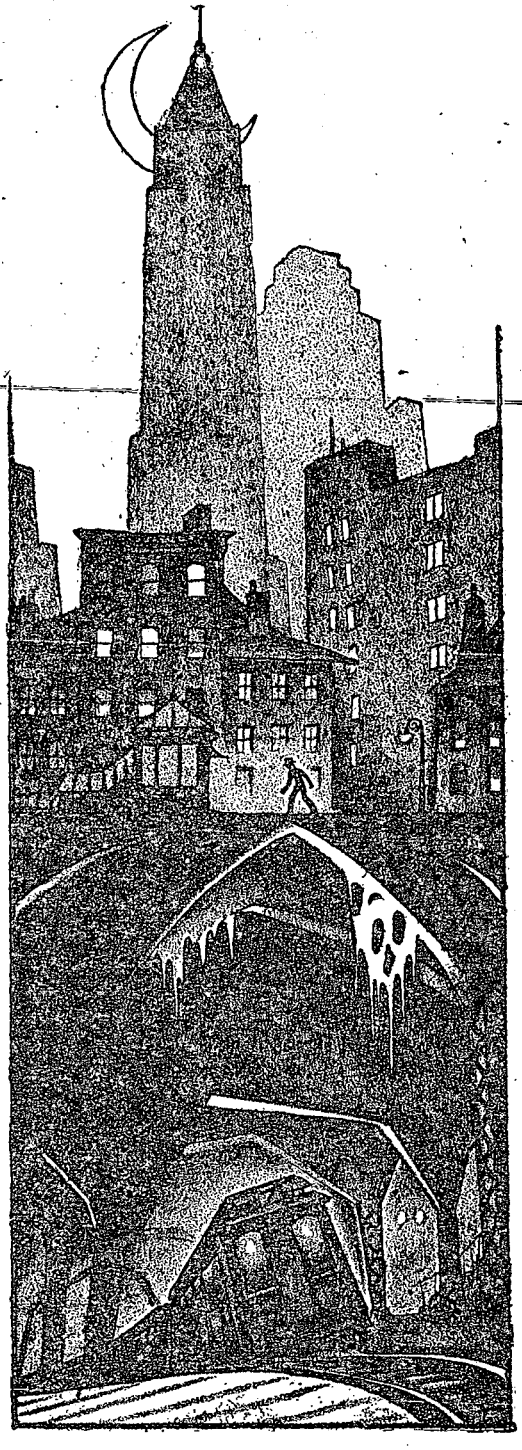
THE seer had said—all things of certain wisdom and uncertain origin would derive so well from seers—"At the end, the old look back to relive and see again the pattern of their lives. But the young, peculiarly favored by a destiny which otherwise seems to have neglected them, look searchingly forward, and for this brief instant of eternity see truly what would have been ahead—before the light snuffs out."

It was a few minutes past five when Henry Abernathy left the office. It was always a few minutes past five when Henry Abernathy left the office. By that time he had taken care of the overflow of work which somehow always found its way to his desk toward the end of the working day and had put away his seersucker coat in the General Employees' Locker.

Longer ago than it would do to remember, Henry had been pleased by the title of Junior Assistant Supervisor of Transportation. He was Assistant all right—to everybody in the office—Supervisor of nothing, and Junior—that was a laugh, with the gray in his hair and the stooped shoulders!

As usual, Henry walked three blocks directly south from the office to the subway station, stopping only for the evening paper at the corner stand. It was all quite as usual. But he had been telling himself all day that this was an important day. He was going to break clean from the old life.

From the earliest, a phrase had been running through his head. It ran in well-worn channels for he had thought this thought before, he knew, though its authorship was obscure. The seer had said . . . and the quotation, for that it must be, fascinated him,



Heading by Boris Dolgov

A ghostly train that never was, heads for a ghastly destination that couldn't be . . .

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he knew not why, he'd never known why. Henry Abernathy had believed before in the clean break from his meaningless routine, from the same old faces at the office, the same stupid tasks, the same fear that lashed him with its thongs of insecurity to his humble position.

THINKING this way took him down the metal-tipped subway stairs, through the turnstile and onto the lower level where he waited for his train as he had, it seemed thousands of times before.

He was suddenly struck with this dim, twinkle-lit cavern way beneath the perimeter of the earth's surface. The people around him, the steel girders holding the rest of the world from tumbling in upon him, the gum machines, the penny scales . . . all these seemed to go out of focus with his concentration on his inner thinkings.

Through instinct he watched the black hole to his left at the end of the platform. He watched more closely, narrowly, as first the noise and then the flickering something away in the tunnel came closer, still closer. He looked up, he knew not why for it was a completely irrelevant act, at the ceiling of the underground station. It seemed, in the subterranean gloom, as far away as the top of the universe.

He was tired, he supposed. Supposed? He *knew*. Life does that to you, doesn't it? To everyone. Abernathy wondered if those around him were as miserable as he was, or if their misery was an unrecognized, locked-up something deep inside. For this underground tomb was a place for reflection, although conversely, in its bustle and noisome urgency, humans could take holiday from their consciences, and pushing, wriggling, hurrying off and on these mechanized moles that bore them to and from their tasks, forget, and in the forgetting be complacent.

Times before beyond counting when Henry Abernathy had waited here like this for his A or B train, he'd thought that people must age faster in such an alien environment—the so-hard, yieldless platform, the dank air, the farness away from things that counted like sky and sun and wind. He wondered if people like himself didn't surely age more rapidly in a subway tomb like this where neither hope nor anything else could grow or flourish.

THE dull metal thing slid into the station, its caterpillar length bucking with shrill, rasping protests, its garish-lit cars beckoning. The doors slid open and Henry Abernathy walked automatically forward, glancing as he always did—for he was a meticulous man—at the square in the window that gave the alphabetical letter of the train. There were only two that came to this platform—the A, which was an express and the B, a local. Both would get him home.

He was aboard with the doors slid silently closed behind him and the train jerking, jumping to life again; he was sitting on the uncomfortable cane seats when what he had just automatically glanced at in the identification square on the outside window took form in his mind. So strongly that he got up and walked over to the window and looked at the letter in reverse. It glowed smally against the moving black background of tunnel, for they were out of the station now. It said plainly, so there could be no mistake, Z train.

The subway shook with its gathering speed, and Henry went back to his seat. It was most peculiar. Never before had any but an A or a B train run on this track. He'd never heard of a Z train! Why . . . he didn't even know where he was going!

He sat with his hands clasped in his lap and felt on the other side of the wonder a relief that maybe this was the beginning of his adventure. The train lurched and zoomed on, and as the moments ticked away ominously, he realized that the underground monster fled headless and heedless without the reprieve of those occasional lighted oases in the dreadful night of the subway. Surely they would have come to another station by now! Then . . . wait a moment more. Certainly by *now*! This, then, was his adventure! This was the difference that would, despite himself and his own weakness to effect the change, *any* change, alter the course for him. That part he gloated over—no more boss, no more regular hours. . . .

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The train was going faster. It has been a monotonous life, Henry Abernathy, he told himself. Monotonous and quite terrible. He could confess to himself now something that he would never do in the sunshine or on the street that was somewhere miles above him and this rushing thing that bore him on. He would confess that he had thought of self-destruction.

A clamminess came over him. The air from the tunnel was dank as it whistled in an open window at the other end of the car. It was a very long way between stations, and at this speed, that wasn't right!

HE SOUGHT out other faces for reassurance. Somehow, quite suddenly, there seemed to be so few of them, and with those, the eyes were averted or hidden behind bundles or papers. Abernathy cleared his throat to test his voice. He would say to someone—the nearest person—"Beg pardon, but what train am I on?" Now wasn't that a silly question! He was sitting nearly directly across from the window whereon the identification plate was set, and that plate said so clearly—Z train.

He sat more stiffly against the seat back, tension taking hold of him and ramrodding his body. It was his imagination that said that the train plunged forward eagerly into the ever-greater darkness of the unfolding tunnel, for a train doesn't plunge eagerly—not even a Z train! A poetic liberty, a figment of the imagination!

Henry fixed his eyes on the nearest person to him—a very young man with books and sweater, obviously just from school, an eager young man, so eager. With dreams, Henry Abernathy thought with a kind of sadness. The young man was looking at nothing particularly, and Abernathy thought, Ah, soon he will look at me. I shall catch his eye and say, leaning forward so I don't have to advertise it to the whole rest of the car, "Young man, I seem to have gotten on the wrong train"—a small smile at my own stupidity—"but just *where* are we going?"

But the young man in the sweater would not look this way. He tapped his books with his fingertips, tapped his foot on the floor, whistled through his teeth and looked out the window or up and down the car, casually, swiftly.

Abernathy got up to speak to him directly then thought better of it. He passed by close enough to see that the youngster was cleaner than most. He rather imagined *he* had looked something like that on his way home from school years ago, but that was far from here in both time and space.

There was a girl, a pretty girl, he noticed—for he was not too old to miss those things—wide-set eyes, a good chin, nice mouth, well-dressed. He would ask her, but of course one didn't do that. With other men in the car, it would look . . . well, *forward* if he directed his inquiries to a pretty young girl.

There were several other men, heavy set, semi-successful or better, watch chains over their paunches, briefcases—the business type. Bosses. They reminded him so. . . .

Then nearly at the door that opened between the cars there was another man, youngish, in an ill-fitting tuxedo, probably going to a party. It was a rented tuxedo, Henry Abernathy thought to himself with some satisfaction. He knew what *that* was, all right! Why, when he'd been just about that age, he'd once rented a tuxedo and it probably had looked no better on him than it did on this fellow.

ABERNATHY reached the door and clutched at the reddish-yellow brass knob. It had the reassuring feel of all of life, of reality, with the stickiness from scores of hands; people opening and closing it, walking forward, walking back, touching it with their hands.

He went forward then, adding his steps to the speed of the train in that direction. Was it one, two, or three cars, he wasn't sure, nor was he of the other passengers. He staggered a little to the rocking of the subway beneath him. He yearned suddenly to be rid of this thing—this scene, this place. All those figures, those persons he'd sat with in the first car took on a strange, nightmarish familiarity in his mind.

It was the drudgery, the overwork, and the hopelessness of his life that made him

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this way he excused, like other people say, "Something I ate."

That was what made him *know* that the young boy with the sweater was Henry Abernathy, and so too perhaps, was the slightly older man in the rented tuxedo. The girl was the *she* who had said no. That was long ago too. And those men, those out-of-shape pudgy, expensive cigar-smoking men, were the bosses he'd worked for and others he hadn't worked for, who had given him a glance and dismissal with a look as being beneath them and unworthy of their attention.

The fullness of horror overtook Henry Abernathy as he reached the front of the first car. He leaned against the motorman's compartment and looked ahead at the tunnel rushing onto them and around them. The tunnel curved away, curved away always turning, it seemed, as though they were going in a circle.

Henry stood and watched fascinated. He could go no further. He could not go back. He looked curiously into the motorman's cubicle. That place was dark, the shade drawn nearly to the bottom of the window.

But there was a man in there with a motorman's cap, and a gloved hand rested on the throttle pulled full open . . . a man who swayed with the motion of the train he drove. A motorman.

THE years came back to Henry like leaves falling in sequence, and those people back there behind him were all parts of it, of himself and of others he had known. This train then was what? His life from beginning to end and his destiny?

He stood hypnotized by his thoughts, drawn by the dark fascination of the tunnel ahead, the little yellow lights that flashed by, marking with their feebleness both space and speed. It was an eternity that Henry Abernathy stood there . . . or it was one second. It mattered neither.

But ahead, finally, he saw something. It was not exactly a station, but there was a light, a small flickering light set in the side of the tunnel, and they seemed now instead of rushing towards it, to float towards it.

The screeching, groaning, complaining shrieks of the subway at high speed died away so they must be slowing down. The light came nearer. There was a sign, a very big sign. He'd seen them before on the occasion when a crowded train at rush hour stops between stations in the darkness of the tunnel and the sign, perhaps pointing or indicating a nearby stairway that leads to the above—the sign says "Exit."

There was a sign here under the light. But look, there was more. Across the tracks there was something. He watched intently during the hours it seemed that it took their train to roll closer. It mattered not which he saw first, in what order he perceived these things—the sign, the thing on the tracks; the thing on the tracks, the sign.

It was a body on the tracks, lying face upward fully across them, like a sack of something. The face was strangely luminous in the tunnel's darkness, and that face was as terribly familiar as those others behind him in the train. And it was so *right* and so *of course* that the sign under the flickering, yellow light simply read "Z."

They were close now, within a couple of rapid pulse beats; the body nearly under the metal monster; the sign, the Z of it growing larger and larger.

And then there was a blinding flash—all the brightness of all the world, of all time exploding in the tunnel, across the so-familiar face and body and Z sign into the train, into him and his head, touching chords and notes that came out like music—that's what it was—music, easy to hear as it played around and around.

IT WAS the sound of the carousel, the calliope, and as the little series of whistles, played by keys like an organ, popped and hooted, Henry Abernathy went around and around in the sea of remembering on the gaily painted horse—a horse that fed and brightened itself on his tears of joy and pleasure.

This was an important train day for Henry. He was going to break clean from the old life, and perhaps the old life started—or the only part of it that counted started—on the floor at home with the cream-

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colored walls that seemed so tall at the age of seven.

And though he was much beyond it, there were blocks on the floor. He was to spell something out with them, and Mother was persistent. It was a word, a meaningless word, that matters not among the thousands in our language. He was perverse, and there was one letter he would not add, but Mother was so persistent.

"Think!" she said. "Think!"

And he remembered the deepening color of her face, remembered it as he remembered now all these other things, past and future.

"Think!" she repeated. "Think!"

One letter he had to add to make the word perfect, to fill it out for her adult mind to correctness.

"Think!" she said again. *"It's an unusual letter!"*

He knew the letter so well. He had but to push it into place with his foot or his hand. But revolt stayed him.

And then Mother said darkly: "Think, Henry! Do it or you don't go to the fair!"

And with that the roulette wheel completed its final spin and stopped, marking its choice, and he, petulantly and still unwilling but broken down by the knowledge that he would lose something greater, kicked the letter into place.

And she smiled with the victory and said, "Of course! Z! You knew it all the time, Henry!"

It was later, then, that he had gone to the carnival almost exploding with his small-child excitement. Was there enough time for all the things that had to be done and seen, touched and played with? Was there enough of him to smell and eat all the things to be smelled and eaten?

AND at the end, the best of all—the merry-go-round, on the horses that went *up* and down, *up* and down, round and round, with the strange, strange wonderful music of the calliope—he would travel miles on his green and yellow horse even as Mother stood outside the world of his racetrack and gestured and seemed to stamp her foot, wanting him to stop and making motioning noises.

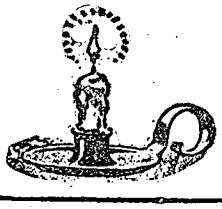
It was then—sometime during his umpteenth ride on the bucking green and yellow merry-go-round horse—then so that his seven-year-old mind knew well the whistling sounds of the calliope organ, then that something had come out of another world, it seemed—a thing of crashing noise and blinding light; a thing prefaced only by a little wetness and Mother's anger as she stood, no longer controlling him, already completely outside of his world, under a hastily raised umbrella, stamping her foot and calling to him.

Henry was caught up then in that instant by his friend, who took him in this time of greatest joy bursting like the nod of a flower. It was for that moment that the seer had spoken . . . that the calliope played . . . that Z was remembered

It was that moment that showed him how it would have been in times yet unborn, to be forgotten forever in time never to be. . . .

Angles can have and hold
a horror all their own . . . .

The Triangle of Terror



in the next Weird Tales

by

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

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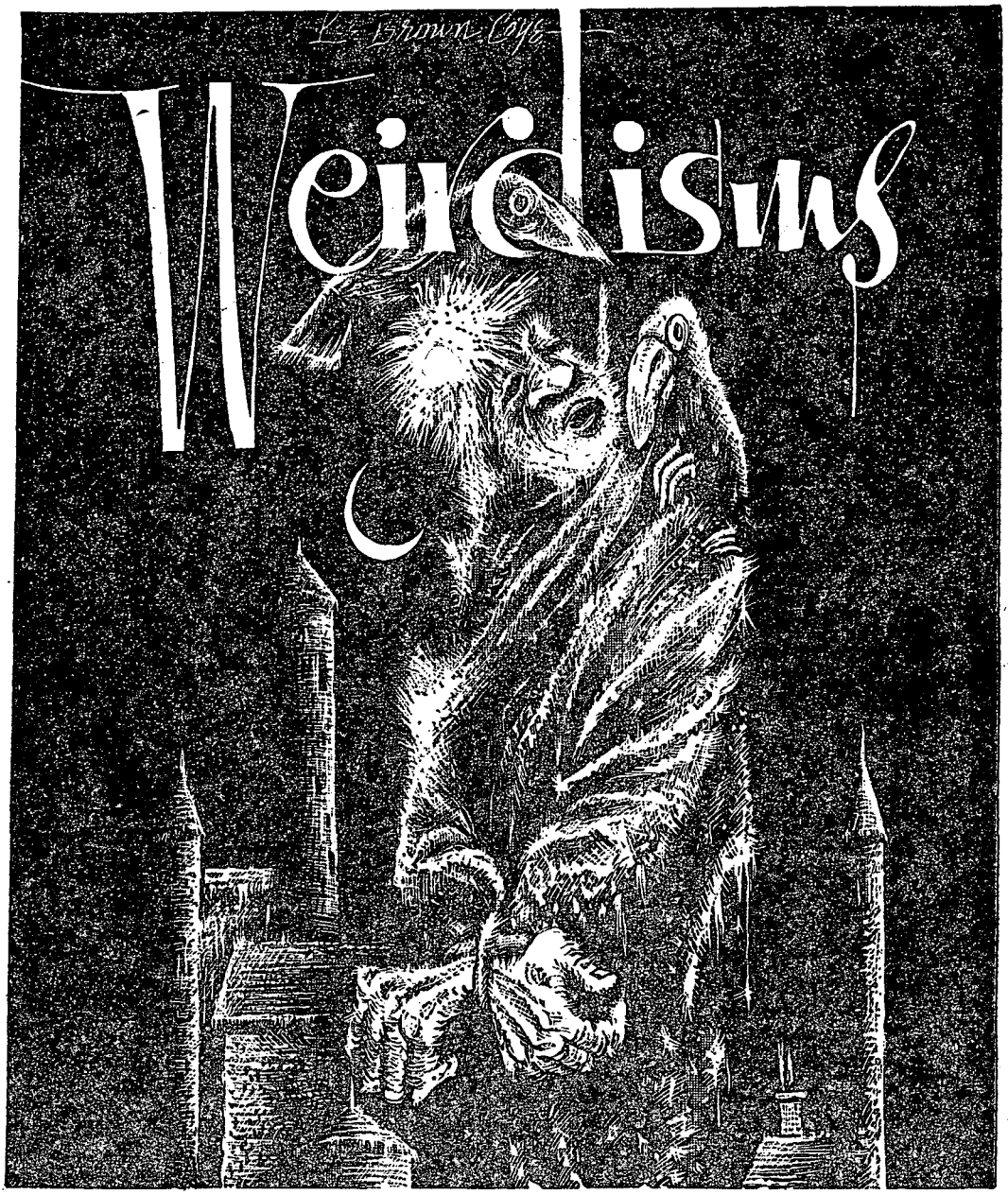

AMONG THE WITCH-FINDERS OF OLD ENGLAND, THE MOST NOTORIOUS WAS ONE MATTHEW HOPKINS. THIS CRUEL & SADISTIC MONSTER ASSUMED THE MIGHTY TITLE OF WITCH-FINDER GENERAL & TRAVELED THE COUNTIES OF ENGLAND DEALING OUT TORTURES & OBTAINING CONFESSIONS. ACCORDING TO THE TEMPER OF THE TIMES HE WAS LOOKED UPON AS A REFUGE AGAINST THE SPELLS OF THE DEVIL. BUT IN HIS PERIOD OF GREATEST PROSPERITY, WHEN HIS FAME & FORTUNE WERE REACHING GREAT HEIGHTS, HIS METHODS WERE INVESTIGATED & THEY PROVED TOO MUCH FOR EVEN THE CALLOUSED ROGUES OF THE WITCH COURTS. HE WAS TRIED & HUNG & WITH THE HANGING OF MATTHEW HOPKINS WAS CONCLUDED ONE OF THE MOST APPALLING ADVENTURES IN PRIVATE ENTERPRISE THAT HISTORY HAS RECORDED.

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Stay With Me

BY SHELBY STEGER

GEORGE BULEN shivered and roused himself in the chair—cold! Behind drawn shutters, the big square high-ceilinged rooms of the ancient fieldstone house remained cool even in the hovering smothering heat of midwest summers. Now in winter, with the blizzard spent these three nights, cold crouched still and deadly outside, its breath seeking under doors, freezing on windows.

Bulen's mind came full awake. *Was Gram dead? Had she escaped while he dozed?*

In sharp panic he rose and stood staring down at the old lady who lay, frail and tiny, in the vast bed with its tall carved walnut head and foot. The room was lit dimly by a shaded lamp, but Bulen could see well enough the face he hated. Gram still lived.

The wrinkled lids were closed, the puckered mouth, void of teeth, hung slightly

Heading by Vincent Napoli

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open, the withered cheeks were white and bloodless. It was a corpse's face. But the flat chest, a mere bony cage for the weary imprisoned heart, still rose and fell beneath the quilts.

Who'd have dreamt I could keep the old witch this long! Bulen mused. She should have died the other night, when Emery—died. She wanted to, but I wouldn't let her.

Well, for all the furtive gossip about him in the village, no one in Midwood had ever said George Bulen wasn't a good doctor.

Bulen stirred up the rosy fireplace embers and threw another chunk on, held his long hands to the leaping heat. Steady hands; the tremor was only noticeable in the mornings. It went away with the day's first half-tumbler of whiskey.

They talked about that, too, in Midwood. *Drinks some, sure—who wouldn't, living in that spooky old house—but the Doc knows his business. His brother Emery, now—there was your booze-fighter! Could put away a quart or two, could Emery, and look sober as you please. Until his eyes'd glaze, his tongue get thick, and—blam! over he'd go. Flat on his face, like a falled post-oak. Funniest thing you ever seen.—But Doc? Hell, Doc can handle it . . .*

George Bulen stepped to the window, pulled the wooden blind aside. The land sloped away from the house, down to the creek, on past to the gate which opened onto the county road. All Bulen land once, but now Gram owned only the acre or so on which the square graceless house squatted. Emery was dead; the property would be George's soon. As soon as he dared let the old lady die—

Monday's blizzard had swirled down from near midnight until late the following day. Now, on Thursday—no, nearly three of Friday morning, said Bulen's watch. Now the land was swathed, declivities and hummocks smoothed out into a gently undulating whiteness which glittered in the thin starlight. Trees hunched beneath the snow's weight, drifts obscured the fences. And where the footlog lay across the shallow creek, there was a barely perceptible snow mound.

That mound was Emery Bulen, who was dead.

The creek had still been flowing Monday night. Now it was frozen, holding Emery in its rigid embrace. Emery had been the one who roamed, while George had been forced to stay. With Emery out of the way, it would be different. George would be free to go—as soon as he learned from the old woman what he had to know, and could let her die.

EMERY had been very drunk when the village taxi had brought him out from town Monday night. Answering the bell, George Bulen had not been too surprised to see him leaning in the doorway, holding the threadbare collar of a thin topcoat about his throat. That Emery would get here before she died, had been part of Gram's prediction; she had written it down to show George, before she was bedridden.

"The prodigal bum." His dark eyes had been haggard in his unshaven face, but Emery's grin had had a ragged jauntiness. "Had a hunch that Gram was bad, George. Rode a freight from Omaha to St. Louis and thumbed it down to Midwood. Had to see Gram, George, before she goes."

Emery and his hunches, Gram and her predictions! So Gram had been right and Emery wasn't dead, for all the years he'd been away. George had wanted to have Emery declared legally dead long ago, but "I'd know if Emery was gone," Gram had protested stubbornly.

The rest of Gram's prediction was wrong, though. George Bulen had not been going to murder Emery. George had juggled life and death before, professionally, but he was smart enough to know he couldn't murder his brother and get away with it. Yes, the old witch was 'way off on that one.

"Come in, boy, come in." Bulen had led Emery to the kitchen, poured him a stiff drink. "Get this into you; you're half frozen."

You fool, why did you come back? As soon as she's gone, I'd have you declared legally dead. Now I'll have to share the estate, watch you piddle away what should be mine, as you did before.

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Talking, they had drunk together, George sparingly, Emery gulping the big drinks George poured for him.

"Gram and I—always something between us, so we knew when things were wrong with the other. Had to come, George."

"Gram's all right, but she's sleeping." She was dying, but Bulen could not bring himself to confirm the call, the cry which must have gone keening along the wind to wherever Emery had been. "You can see her tomorrow. Drink up, Emery."

Watching Emery's drunkenness mount almost visibly, like the mercury in a thermometer, the idea had come to George whole. It had certain imperfections, but it was well worth trying.

When the bottle was empty, "We'll drive to town for more whiskey, before the blizzard's any worse," George Bulen had told his brother. "You walk on ahead and open the gate while I put my coat on and get the car out."

Never leaving the front doorway, Bulen had watched Emery weave through the swirl of snow. He knew alcohol's way with Emery—he was gambling that, precariously just this side of stupor, the drunken man would fall. Fallen, that he would slide into slumber, from slumber to death.

Through the dazzle of falling snow, George Bulen had watched his brother slip on the icy footlog and sprawl in the shallow little creek. When after five minutes Emery had not risen, Bulen had gently shut the front door. Drowned? Head crushed against a rock? Or just passed out and dying from exposure?

It didn't matter. The important thing was that Emery was dead. Now he, George, was Gram's sole heir.

From the closet off his waiting room, Bulen had taken a full bottle from the wooden case. The amusing thing—Gram and Emery had always claimed that George had no sense of humor, but he had, he had! —the amusing thing was that, for all the hundreds of times he had futilely wished Emery dead, George had managed at last to kill him. And with no slightest chance of ever being suspected, much less accused.

A tragic accident—*My God, sheriff, I begged him to stay till morning, or at least let me call the taxi back for him. But he insisted the walk would clear his head. If I'd only known how drunk he really was—*

It was extremely amusing, Bulen had thought, climbing the stairs. He'd like to tell Gram about it, but he hated to give her the satisfaction of knowing that her prediction that he'd murder Emery had come true.

He had found the old woman struggling to raise herself on the pillows.

"Emery's dead. I heard his voice downstairs, and now he's dead in the snow. You killed him, George."

"Yes, he's dead. It was time. Sometimes a doctor has to know when to let a person die," he said bluntly. "You can die now, too. Everything's mine. I'll buy that city practice I should have had years ago."

"Die? Of course I'll die now. I was only waiting for Emery. You might have let me see him." She had lain and stared at him. "You killed him for nothing. There's nothing but the house, no money." Weak, almost dead of the incredibly worn-out heart, she had laughed aloud, a witch's cackle. "No money at all, George. And who'll buy a haunted house? Besides, you can't leave; I've fixed it so you can't."

THE blue lips had turned bluer, and Bulen had thought she was going to die. He had crushed an ampoule in his handkerchief, held it to her face, and she had come back. When she was stronger, he had questioned her, scornful, yet fearful of the hold she'd always had on him.

"Why can't I leave?" He had wanted to shake her, but was afraid of killing her.

"My prediction of Emery's murder—I hid it," she had breathed. "You'll never find it. Once I'm gone, you'll leave—you were always terrified of being alone, George. You'll be afraid to stay to look for it. But boys, maybe—boys love to plunder a deserted house. They'll find it and take it to the sheriff. He'll go after you."

George Bulen had shuddered with an instant's icy fear—she could always scare him with her spooky talk.

"The hell with the sheriff!" he had flared.

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"Who can make murder out of an accident to a drunken fool?"

"I wrote it down, how to make you tell. Remember how I could always make you tell the bad things you did, George? Just lock you up in the dark, alone. You never could be alone with your wicked self in the dark, George. You'd scream and hammer at the door until I let you out. 'Gram, Gram, stay with me and I'll tell,' you'd scream. Much as you hated me, you'd cling to me and tell me what I wanted to know. I wrote it down, George, how to make you tell you killed Emery."

"You lie!"

She had not written all that, he told himself as he had gone through the entire house, a room at a time, frantically looking everywhere, everywhere for the paper the old woman said she'd hidden. She had lied —he could not find it.

If it *were* true, if it were found after he had left, they could not make him confess. He was a man, not a scared boy; he could not be made to confess.

Still, if it were true—?

George Bulen had remembered when, several years ago, the highway police had picked him up, mistakenly, on a hit-and-run charge. He was not guilty, but after the night in the cell, inescapably behind bars, alone in the stinking dark, he had huddled on the grimy cot in a frenzy of hysteria. *Let me out!* the words had hammered crazily in his brain, while sweat drenched his cramped, huddled body; *I'll tell, I'll tell if you'll let me out!*

Soon he would have been screaming the words which had fluttered and beat behind his fear-slackened lips. But the police had picked up the real hit-and-run driver and unlocked Bulen's cell. The false confession had subsided, had sunk back down into the churning hysteria deep within him, as the cell was unlocked and he was freed.

GEORGE BULEN now turned back from the window into the dimly lit room. Emery was gone, into empty darkness, and Gram was not being allowed to follow. He was keeping her here, with medicines and skill; he had to make her tell him where she had hidden the paper she claimed she had written. It was good, too, to let misery wrench and rend her until she should escape from him.

His eye caught the fluttering movement of one of the old lady's hands. He crossed to the bedside.

"Water, Gram?" Gravely he inclined his narrow, graying head, reached for her skinny hand; dry and cold, the almost fleshless fingers lay in his palm like the ivory slats of a broken fan. His own fingers slid to the bony wrist, briefly noted the erratic pulse. "Better yet, there's hot milk in the thermos. We've got—"he chuckled drily— "we've got to keep your strength up, you know."

Weakly she moved her head against the pillow; the meager light glinted on the waxy-pale part in her thin hair, her scalp the color of the scanty yellow-white braids which hung beside her cadaver's cheeks.

"Nothing." The black eyes, scoured dull of the waspish humor which used to light them, looked up into his. "Emery? He's still—out there?"

Bulen poured himself a drink from the bottle on the marble-topped dresser.

"He'll be there until—well, let's see." The doctor's eyes, the red-brown color of the drink he held, flickered at her mockingly. "When the road's cleared and the mail truck gets through, maybe Ed'll notice Emery there beneath the snow. Or maybe I'll have to try to get out on a call and I'll —find him. More likely the mail man, though—I left word with the operator that you were very low and I'd take only urgent calls."

Devoted to his old Gram, people at Midwood would be saying. *Could have been a big city doctor, but he stayed home with her. 'Twas that no 'count Emery that lit out and went to the city. Yep. Doc's got his faults, but he's been mighty good to old Gram Bulen.*

Gram whimpered. "Emery!"

"He won't hear you. He's dead."

"Emery—"

"Call him, then." Bulen sat again in his chair, drank from the glass, set it aside. "Do you think he'll be back, like Grandpa?

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Those *are* Grandpa's footsteps you claim you hear sometimes in the hall, aren't they?"

"You've heard the footsteps, too."

"Never!" he lied. "I've heard rats in the walls. I've heard an old house creak as it cooled. I've heard——"

He fell silent. He had heard the footsteps often; hearing them, he had known the sound was not rats, not the creaking of timbers. But it could not be what Gram said it was. No one could come back from nowhere.

Death was an ending. He had conquered his fear of it. It was not from compassion for those who suffered that George Bulen had become a doctor; he had never been burdened with the softness of pity. He had studied medicine so as to probe the frightful mystery of death.

There was no mystery. Just the ceasing from being. People died and became cold flesh, just as had the birds he shot as a boy, the cats and dogs he had killed with his BB gun. Death was nothing; he certainly did not fear it.

Had Gram really hidden a note, to be found and destroy him? She had hidden his BB gun, told him the spirits took it to punish a cruel boy. Half believing in Gram's spirits then, he had yet searched for the gun. Not until months later did he find it, in the spring branch at the far end of the pasture, rusted and ruined where she had wired it to a stone and sunk it.

"Damn you," he said sullenly, "with your ghosts and fortune-telling, your haunted houses and your clairvoyance."

The dull old eyes turned to the ceiling, where fire-shadows flickered. "I see things, I know things. You can't deny it," she whispered. "How else did I know that Emery died in the snow, that you killed him?"

"The ravings of a dying old woman," Bulen said cruelly. "If there were anyone to listen, no one would believe."

Fakery—she guessed cleverly. Just as, when the stupid village girls used to come to have their fortunes told, Gram made little darting guesses. *A tall young man, dark . . . oh, blond? yes. I see him clearer now . . . he loves you very much, dearie . . .*

Fakery, yet it had brought a steady trickle of foolish women, sometimes even men, to the old fieldstone house, eager to be told what they wanted to be told. No wonder, Bulen mused savagely, he had wanted to escape to the city. The doctor, the cool man of science, living with a granny-woman, a witch, a soothsayer!

BUT it had been Gram's money which put him through medical school. It would have been Gram's money which would have bought him the city practise he wanted. Only Gram had refused that.

"Midwood needs a doctor," she had told him nearly twenty years ago. "Besides, I haven't enough for you and Emery, too. It's Emery's turn now."

"For what? He couldn't farm the place profitably, nor hold a job in town. For a honeymoon with Lucille, maybe?" Bulen had laughed scornfully. "I'll marry Lucille, you finance the city practise for me, and you'll be money ahead, for I'll pay you back. Emery's weak, he'll fail. Let him stay here where he belongs."

Gram had still been fiery twenty years ago.

"You leave Lucille alone," she had blazed. "She loves Emery and he loves her; they'll be happy. Maybe that cold wickedness you've got in you fascinates the child, but that'll pass. She'd be miserable with you; any woman would. You leave Lucille alone."

Lucille had been attracted to him, Bulen mused; the soft, pretty, big-eyed little thing would tremble when he talked to her. She had been afraid of him—*ah, it was lovely when they were frightened! Like holding a bird in your hand, knowing you could crush the fragile pulsing to stillness, any time, whenever you were ready. And the waiting, and sensing the lovely fright . . .*

But Gram had given Emery the money George wanted and he took Lucille to the city. He bought a gas station. Marriage seemed to settle him; he worked hard and did well for several years. Then Lucille died with her first baby. Emery went back to his drinking then, went on the bum, and disappeared.

So here George Bulen had been, stuck

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with a country practise where, when they paid you at all, it might be in potatoes or chickens or, perhaps for an operation, a heifer with its calf. Some money, of course, but not enough. You couldn't buy a city practise with a basket of eggs and a farm-cured ham, so you waited.

He had hated every minute of those twenty years, every dreary, grubby minute. Oh, there had been small secret amusements, to be savored with the mind. There was, often, the heady awareness of life and death, nicely balanced in your hands. The old hillbilly, for instance, whose family could not possibly pay you, anyway. When you discovered you'd forgotten to restock your kit with sulfa, rather than make the long trip to town and back over the wretched roads, you gave him aspirin instead, let him wheeze and rattle an end to his shiftless days. There was the rabid child you'd been called to see too late for Pasteur shots—well, you finally put him to sleep. Not out of pity for the convulsions which were tearing him to screaming shreds, but because the snapping jaws might have done you injury.

There were the awkward questions the boys at the pool hall sometimes asked—*Say, uh, Doc, a friend of mine*——Very funny, some of those questions, especially when you knew the girl involved.

Girls. You had to be careful in a small community where everyone knew you, so there was little of that. But there were books; not that you could afford all you wanted. The few you had were cleverly written, the scenes whispering slyly through your brain like opium fumes. And the illustrations—you wondered who the artists might be, who had both skill and the necessary antic imagination for those illustrations.

And there was the whiskey. You drank much more than anyone suspected, but it was good whiskey, the body builds up a growing tolerance, and—well, you weren't weak, like Emery. You knew how to take care of yourself.

None of this made up for living with a crazy old woman who spent her time in the past, rocking before the fireplace in this fusty bedroom. The dusty cushion of the rocker by the fireplace still held the imprint of her scrawny body; her knitting basket still leaned against it.

He'd looked in the knitting basket for the paper she'd hidden; it wasn't there.

Nothing made up for being forced to live with a crazy old woman who "saw things." She'd predicted Lucille's death, too, had written it down. "I don't know when nor how, but I've written it, it's coming." She had screamed and yammered with sobs when Lucille finally died in childbirth. Not when Emery's telegram came next day to tell her of the death. Before, at the actual moment when Lucille must have been dying.

Coincidence. These things had to be coincidence.

A crazy old woman. Quite unafraid, she saw things you couldn't see—"elementals," she called some of them. And even though you knew she was crazy, that there was nothing there, your flesh crisped to hear her say crossly, in the impatient tone one might use to a pesty child, "In Christ's name, begone." Elementals, it seemed, could be banished by the name of Christ, Buddha, any of the mystic Masters—

Aaah!

BULEN rose, snatched the bottle from the dresser, brought it back to his chair. When he had drunk from it, he set it beside him on the table. Why think of these things! She was crazy, crazy.

Still, what of the unseen thing which had, for a while, broken dishes in the kitchen? A poltergeist, Gram said; poltergeists were mischievous spirits from a plane a bit higher than that of the beastlier elementals. Such nonsense—doubtless she broke the dishes herself, to prove some esoteric point. Finally she had muttered over an onion, set it above the kitchen door—or was that to ward off sickness?

He forgot—anyway, there had been no more broken dishes.

Emery had always believed. He and Gram used to laugh at the boy George who could not hide his fear.

"No need to be scared of Grandpa," Emery told George when the footsteps

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wandered the hall upstairs. "There's just something he didn't finish in life, Gram says. He's just restless; he wouldn't hurt you."

Well, George Bulen was not afraid any more. He had seen death, had willed it to go or stay. It was an ending, not a continuance. No one ever came back. If they did, you'd know Gram was right about all her craziness. You'd know there was a doorway, through which you'd shudder to step. There was no doorway, just a wall. There'd be no punishment, later. No punishment for the things you'd done.

There was the comforting assurance—that you need not be afraid of either living or dying.

THE old lady surged up from a doze and groaned, her hand scrabbling at her breast. George Bulen jumped to his feet, snatched a tiny white pill and thrust it beneath her tongue.

In a moment she was better. He wiped the sweat from her face; the skin moved beneath the damp towel, loosely, like crumpled cloth.

"Let me go, George." It was the first time she had pleaded.

"You're anxious, aren't you? You think there's something further on, some bright happiness, don't you? There's nothing but empty blackness, nothing." He leaned toward her, rage curdling within him. "Tell me you lied, that there's no hidden note, and I'll let you go."

She shook her head, lips puckered tightly within themselves.

"Then I'll keep you here as long as I can. If you're finding the minutes long, think how the years have been for me. Wanting to go, having to stay." He gestured toward the dresser. "I've the big needle in readiness, the one that goes directly into the heart. I'll use it last of all. It may delay you quite some little time."

She closed her eyes. To prevent her dozing, he spoke rapidly, loudly.

"Once you're gone, I'll sell this miserable old place and go to the city. There's a shortage of doctors; I won't have to buy a practise now. Ghosts or no ghosts, I'll get enough for the house to start me out."

He drank from the bottle again; bad habit, that—it made it look like he needed the stuff worse than he did.

"Ghosts!" He gave a snort of laughter. "If this place could be haunted, Emery'd be here by now."

"Emery had happiness, with Lucille. He'll not be back. It's the unhappy ones, the restless ones who left something unfinished. Unpunished, even—" The tired voice threaded off into silence.

"If Emery comes back, it'll be for my whiskey. And I'll fill him up and send him out again, to die again." George Bulen laughed a little shilly; he was drunk, he thought.

Well, why not! A celebration. Soon he'd be away—a decent practise, the stimulation of city life, for once in his life enough money to indulge his fancies. No more books; girls, lovely frightened girls.

Yes, he was drunk. But that was all right; he could handle it.

"You'll never leave." Gram's voice was amazingly strong and clear. "Never, George, never!"

She gasped and was still.

"Wait! You haven't told me—"

George Bulen hurried. He tore the old woman's gown aside, with careful accuracy drove the big shining needle into her withered chest, slowly pushed the glass plunger home so that the barrel's contents entered the heart.

It was no good. She was gone.

Bulen straightened, stared with baffled hatred down at her. She had escaped from him.

Still, the final joke was on her. With the last glimmer of consciousness she must have known, must have seen that there was nothing beyond but the murky void.

He felt a roaring lightness bubble through him, such a glowing happiness as he had never known before. He was free, at last he was free.

"I'm not afraid of you any more, old woman! You lied about writing the note, didn't you? There was no note, was there?" It was not the whiskey, but this beautiful joy which was making him babble. "You

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lied, didn't you? Of course you lied!"

And then movement caught the corner of his eye. In the flickering firelight, the rocker seemed to move.

Senseless horror twanged at George Bulen's nerve-ends. The taste of fear foul in his mouth, he turned slowly from the quiet body on the bed.

Gram rocked before the fire. She was knitting.

His eyes wide and staring, Bulen backed toward the door, then stood, listening to the footsteps in the hall, restless, wandering.

His knees held him until he reached the chair by the table; he sank into it.

Tomorrow he'd start again to look for the note. And if he didn't find it—how many days until the road was cleared and the mail man could get through? How many days until he darted from the house, lonely, empty of everything but terror, to point with a shaking hand at the mound in the snow and scream *"Don't leave me alone . . . stay with me and I'll tell . . ."*

The familiar little figure still rocked before the fire.

George Bulen groped for the whiskey bottle. Gram glanced up from her knitting and, with the old malicious humor bright in her black eyes, she smiled.

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"It wasn't my fault—it was the wind blew the cellar door shut."

Heading by John N. Anderson

The Hungry Ghost

BY EMIL PETAJA

GORDON whimpered when Nurse Rawlins came into his private room with his dinner. Nurse Rawlins was a brisk well-scrubbed little dynamo. That smile of hers seemed to be forever saying, *We're going to stop all this nonsense, aren't we, Mr. Keel? We're going to stop it* today.

"Good evening!" she chirped, setting down his tray on the bedstand. "Shall we get ready for our dinner now, Mr. Keel?"

He managed a weak smile. She plumped up his pillows briskly and cranked up the hospital bed. He thought, *she means well, damn her.* She unfolded the tray legs and set it across him on the bed.

"You're looking ever so much better today, Mr. Keel," she said briskly.

"I look like hell and you know it!" Gordon cried. "I'm skin and bones. Take a good look at my face. I look like death.

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I'm as good as dead right now and you know it!" His effort sent him shuddering back against the pillows with a strangled sob. He shut his eyes savagely.

Nurse Rawlins took a few seconds to look hurt, then she became brisk and efficient again. She smiled. "Nonsense!" She lifted the aluminum heat jacket off his entree dish. "Now if you will just try a bite of this veal scallopini. Cook's wonderful at veal scallopini. He made it for you because it's your favorite dish."

Gordon's eyes flicked open in spite of himself. The aroma of the tender, succulent pieces of meat swimming in the rich sauce was torment. He looked at the side dish of creamed asparagus, also a favorite, at the mound of mashed potatoes into which a liberal square of yellow butter had been thrust, at the tossed salad, each green fragment of which sparkled with carefully blended French dressing. There were condiments, too, and a silver pot of coffee.

Everything was chosen to tempt the most picayunish appetite, down to the freshly baked rolls. Everything was exactly as Gordon might have ordered it at his favorite restaurant.

Nurse Rawlins sniffed and couldn't help mentioning the thin lamb chop she had just finished downstairs. "It was all right, but not veal scallopini! Cook went to special pains, Mr. Keel. Dr. Green said spare no expense. The meat was hand-picked at Schwartz's and you know how expensive they are. The chef at Tivoli's made the salad dressing and rushed it over to the hospital by special messen—"

"Shut up!" Gordon groaned. "Will you shut up!"

"Certainly, Mr. Keel," Nurse Rawlins said cheerfully. "I know you're anxious to eat your wonderful dinner." She hummed and stepped to the window, where she pretended to be engrossed in the summer sunset.

"Go away!" Gordon cried weakly.

"I was supposed to stay until you ate every—"

"Take it away!" Gordon sobbed. "Take it out of my sight before I throw it at you!"

Nurse Rawlins whirled anxiously. "What's wrong, Mr. Keel? Don't you like veal scallopini any more? According to your case records you used to be very fond—"

Gordon swallowed hard. His stomach felt as if someone with hands like steel was wringing it. "Please take it away!" he sobbed harshly.

His tears brought all of Nurse Rawlins' dormant pity to the fore, she had to force herself to remember that this was only a phobia Patient Keel had, a psychotic delusion regarding food of any kind. But he had to eat! Dr. Green said he'd die if he didn't. The glucose injections didn't seem to help. Patient Keel's system had developed a curious immunity to artificial feeding.

"Won't you just eat something, Mr. Keel?"

"No!"

"Suppose I feed you." She stepped around the bed.

"No!" Gordon flung out his hands so violently that he spilled sauce across the white tray napkin. He wrenched around and buried his sobs in the pillows. "Go away! Take it away!"

"All right, I'll go," Nurse Rawlins sighed. "But I'll just leave the tray here on the stand where you can reach it." At the door she turned. "I'll have to tell Dr. Green you wouldn't eat your dinner again, Mr. Keel."

AFTER a while Gordon opened his gaunt hungry eyes and stared at the white ceiling. He wouldn't look at that tray. He wouldn't! Why in hell hadn't she taken it away like he told her? Why did they torture him like this?

She thought that he wasn't hungry. My God!

How long had it been? How long was it since he'd eaten a decent uninterrupted meal? How long? A week, a month, a year? No. It couldn't be a year. He'd be dead by now. A year ago he was in Denver. Cousin Grey Ellis hadn't been dead a year. It was actually only a few weeks since Esther brought him to Dr. Green's hospital for treatment. They'd just got back from Honolulu, from their honeymoon. Honeymoon!

Esther had been so regular about every-

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thing. Not that she understood what was really wrong. How could he tell her? If he told her anything at all, then he would have to tell her everything. And then she would shrink away from him, the soft love-light in her clear blue eyes would harden into hatred. He did it for Esther, so they could be married, so Esther could have all the things she should have. But Esther was sweet and good. The fact remained that he *had* done it and she could no longer love him if she knew.

Another thing was ironic. That was Gordon's fetishistic attitude toward food. Ever since he was a child Gordon had revered food. Not that he was a glutton. It was merely a delicious over-emphasis on the pleasures of the table. He loved to eat, to talk about food, to read about it.

His mind flitted back to his childhood in Grantville, a little mining town in southern Colorado. His father couldn't work, having contracted tuberculosis from long years spent underground. His mother took in washing. They were hideously poor, so poor that hamburger was a luxury. Every once in a while, between racking coughs, his father would mention Cousin Grey Ellis out in California. His voice used to be pinched and bitter.

AS A child Gordon had never had much or the best of anything. Maybe that's what did it. He worked hard in school and after school, picking up and delivering heavy sacks of laundry. There was nothing extraordinary about Gordon. He had fair looks, a fair mind. But he wasn't brilliant in any department. He had to work and he did work, hard, to climb up from that pit of poverty.

He was in charge of men's dry goods at Tilson's Mercantile in Denver when he met Esther Craig. He had worked his way up from stock boy, and was now next to Mr. Chambers, the floor walker. Mr. Chambers liked Gordon because he was decently subservient; it was whispered around Tilson's that one day Gordon might be floor walker. All this paled into insignificance when he met Esther. His hunger for food was nothing compared to his hunger for Esther. But Esther Craig lived with an uncle and a grandmother, both of whom enjoyed wealth and social position. Esther was femininely fragile and sweet, he was sure money didn't matter to her. But it did to her uncle and her grandmother. They would never consent to Esther marrying a store clerk—well, department head—and Esther was too feminine to defy them.

Gordon spent many sleepless nights brooding over his unfortunate position before that letter came—the letter telling him Cousin Grey Ellis in California had died.

"Well, Mr. Keel!"

Gordon leaped out of his memories to find Dr. Green by his bed. Dr. Green was a tall brisk man, even brisker than Nurse Rawlins. Tonight Dr. Green had brought another doctor with him, a solemn little man with penetrating eyes. Nurse Rawlins hovered behind them, her brisk little cough said, see what I told you, Doctor?

"You haven't touched your dinner, Mr. Keel," Dr. Green chided. His reproachful smile identified Gordon with a spoiled child.

Gordon's eyes leaped to the food tray. He retched. He longed to tell them to get out, all of them, as he had Nurse Rawlins. But if he did they might take drastic measures. They might send him to an institution for the insane, and he was not insane.

The little man with the penetrating eyes touched Dr. Green's arm. He gestured Nurse Rawlins to take the tray and herself out of the room. She obeyed awefully, and that told Gordon that the little man was important.

Dr. Green confirmed this. "Mr. Keel, this Dr. Ramsey Folliger. Do you know who Dr. Folliger is, Mr. Keel?"

Gordon scowled at the little man. "He's a psycho doctor. But I'm not crazy, Doctor! I'm not!"

Dr. Folliger brushed Dr. Green behind him. He shook his head and smiled at Gordon. "We don't think that at all, Mr. Keel. But frankly, we do think that there is something, some mental block, at the bottom of this obsession of yours."

Gordon laughed and sobbed at the same time. "You can't help me, Dr. Folliger."

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"All the same," and the little man fixed him with his penetrating eyes, "I intend to try."

In the end Gordon told Dr. Folliger everything. Dr. Folliger was that kind of a man. Maybe it was his eyes. When he looked at Gordon and asked questions, he had to answer them truthfully. He had to tell Dr. Folliger just what went on in his mind. Oh, he was clever. Within two hours after Dr. Green stepped back out of Gordon's room, Dr. Folliger had the whole story. . . .

That letter about Cousin Grey Ellis had changed Gordon's life. It put wealth within his grasp. It had traveled quite a bit before it reached him. If only it never had! He might have been happy. After awhile that hungry ache in his heart for Esther would have gradually faded away, he would have become floor walker at Tilson's and more than likely have married Cora Anderson, who made sheep's eyes at him from behind the ribbon counter.

Cousin Grey Ellis had that letter written just before he died. In it he willed Gordon something. No, not his money. He willed Gordon his Cousin Aubrey Ellis. Aubrey was Grey's son and it seemed that he—

In telling Dr. Folliger about it, Gordon relived the whole thing. These memories were all too vivid, etched on his mind with inexorable acid. He remembered hiking down the wet dirt road off the highway, from the cut-off where the Greyhound bus dumped him and his three suitcases. It was evening. It had rained. So it *did* rain in California! He remembered his first sight of that big brown house, half-hidden behind those curiously warted palms with their funny drooping fronds. He had noticed how the brown paint had peeled off the rococo veranda in great patches, how the shingles were loose on that little tower leaning across the lead-gray sky. How the concrete sidewalk was crumbling in places so that tufts of new Spring grass thrust through the cracks. Cousin Grey Ellis had money, lots of money. Yet he persisted in living in this big old country house, which he didn't even keep up.

Then—Cousin Aubrey.

He was sitting at the dining room table in an arm chair. The arm chair had a strap across it, so he wouldn't fall out. He sat there drooling over a plate of fricasseed chicken. His gaping mouth was sloppy with white gravy and bits of chicken, his vacant eyes gawked up at Gordon with idiotic disinterest. He made little puppy noises at the large woman who had set down his spoon to welcome Gordon.

"Can't he even feed himself?" Gordon stared at seventeen-year-old Cousin Aubrey with sharp repugnance. Gordon had great respect for fricassee of chicken, to see it slopped over like that repelled him.

"Nope." The big woman adjusted a hairpin in her graying knot, and then started putting on her cloth coat, which was handy on a chair by the oval dining room table. "Can't eat, nor talk, nor walk. Can't do nothin' for himself." She eyed Gordon sharply. "Case you want to know who I am, I'm Nellie Fawcett. I've been Grey Ellis's nearest neighbor for twelve years. I do his cleaning, and help out. I been takin' care of Aubrey since Grey died." She pierced a long pin through her dowdy black hat with emphasis. "Am I glad to see you. I've got my own kids to feed. Aubrey!" She shook the lackwit's shoulder. "This is your Cousin Gordon. He's come all the way from Denver to take care of you. Won't that be nice?" She turned back to Gordon with a shrug. "He don't understand, but I think he likes to be talked to. After you've fed him, take his clothes off and bathe him, and put him to bed. Oh, yeah, there's a twin baby buggy in the parlor. He likes to be took for a ride in it every afternoon. You'll find out what else there is to do for yourself. Anything comes up, give me a buzz. The number's tacked up on the almanac calendar by the phone. Phone's in the hall, by the cellar door." She gave Aubrey a last look. "Goodbye, Aubrey. Be a good boy."

GORDON soon lost his own delicate taste for food, feeding Aubrey, watching him slobber over every spoonful, wiping the drool off his chin. Whatever sympathy for him existing in Gordon's emotions was soon dissipated as weeks went by, as he watched

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Aubrey whine greedily when his food was brought in, when he washed and toweled that limp white body or wheeled it down the road in that strong oversize baby buggy and cleaned up the messes resulting from feeding.

Cousin Grey Ellis's will was studiedly tantalizing. It hinted of a rosy future for Gordon after Cousin Aubrey passed on. Until such time the purse strings were held in check by the local bank. Only enough money was doled out to provide for their immediate needs and, according to the terms of the will, Gordon could not foist Aubrey off on some paid attendant, either. No, he had to take care of him personally.

Esther's letters alone kept Gordon at his task. The thought that some day Aubrey would die, and then they could be married and live happily ever after helped. But Aubrey was just seventeen. His doctor informed Gordon he might live a long, long time. By then the money wouldn't matter.

Feeding Aubrey was the worst. Gordon approached each succeeding meal with reluctance and horror. Let Aubrey whine. Let him starve. . . .

Why not?

Why not assist Aubrey out of his futile existence? He was no good to himself, no good to anyone—alive. He was a repulsive burden. Dead he would render Gordon a beautiful service, he would make it possible for Gordon to marry Esther and live happily ever after.

It was easy. Gordon didn't even have to change his routine. He simply chose the day after the grocery truck delivered the week's provisions to get himself locked in the cellar. Nobody visited the Ellis house except Nellie Fawcett, and she only occasionally. The old fashioned cellar with the big refrigerator in it had a stout oak door, and on this door was a heavy snap-lock. If someone forgot to unsnap the lock when they went down the wind from the hall window might easily blow the door shut and lock that someone in the cellar. There was only one window, high up, and it was barred against roving animals and burglars. There were no cutting tools in the cellar, they were kept in the old carriage house.

Gordon was very careless that day. He went down in the cellar to fetch some fruit to tempt Aubrey's appetite and he forgot to unsnap the lock. The door blew shut. Gordon was locked in the cellar for five whole days. There was plenty for him to eat down there, but when Nellie Fawcett let him out they found Cousin Aubrey still sitting by the oval dining room table where Gordon had left him, with a plate of five-day-old beef casserole in front of him, quite dead.

Gordon performed beautifully at the inquest. He was the object of much commiseration, not to mention well-concealed envy on his good fortune. Gordon promptly went back to Denver and married Esther. They were in Honolulu, on their honeymoon, when—

It came like a shadow, it leaped down like a super-imposition on a projected slide. They were dining fashionably late on the hotel terrace. Everything had been ordered with the utmost care, and the waiter was given to understand that Gordon was a very particular diner. The breast of guinea hen would go back if it wasn't just right.

The hotel orchestra was playing a sugary waltz. Gordon lingered a moment before applying his knife and fork. He was lifting a succulent morsel of guinea hen to his lips and smiling across the table at Esther as if the food were nothing.

The shadow came down.

Gordon blinked and set down his fork. Why, for a minute Esther wasn't Esther. She was—

"What is it, darling?" Esther's voice lilted reassuringly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Gordon made his lips form a smile. "Because I love you so much," he said gallantly.

He picked up his fork and was touching his lips with it when the shadow came down again. It wasn't Esther sitting there across from him. It was Aubrey, Cousin Aubrey. He was drooling, begging for his dinner.

"From that moment on," Gordon told Dr. Folliger, "my life has been a living hell. I can't eat, Doctor! Every time I start to take even one mouthful I see Cousin Aubrey, staring at my food and mouthing.

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Don't you see? When he was alive the only thing that he responded to was—food. I starved him to death, Doctor! He's come back! He won't let me eat because I starved him!"

"I see." Dr. Folliger paced the room and stroked his bald spot. He turned. "You must realize, Mr. Keel, that this apparition exists only in your mind. You blame yourself for what happened. Oh, perhaps," he waved his pudgy hand, "perhaps subconsciously there were moments when you wished him dead. It's understandable. It's perfectly human in such circumstances. But you must not blame yourself for what happened. *It wasn't your fault.* The wind blew the cellar door shut. You couldn't get out. There was nothing down there you could use to batter the door down. It wasn't your fault, Mr. Keel!"

"Cousin Aubrey thinks so," Gordon whimpered. "He won't let me eat because he's still hungry."

Dr. Folliger shook his head. Then he went to work on Gordon's mind. Within three weeks his daily sessions with Gordon reproved his wizardry at hypnotic suggestion. Gordon ate again. He ate like a horse.

Soon Gordon stepped on the bus with a contented stomach and the slightly drunken joy which the realization that he was on his way to resume his interrupted honeymoon produced. He was glad now that he hadn't allowed Esther to visit him at the hospital. He hadn't wanted her to see him all skin and bones. After all, they were hardly man and wife in actuality. He took out her letter and reread it.

"Darling, I know you wanted me to go back to Denver until you got well, but I had a better idea. You know how we talked of fixing up Cousin Grey Ellis's country house? Well, I've done it, darling! Wait until you see it now. You won't know the old place!"

Gordon sighed at the idea of spending his honeymoon in that house. And yet, why not? Even Dr. Folliger thought it might be good for him. It would cast out his mental delusions forever. To reassure himself he recited the little ritual Dr. Folliger had taught him, jokingly referring to it as a litany of exorcism.

It wasn't my fault. The wind blew the door shut. I only thought I did it because once in a while I wished Cousin Aubrey dead. My guilt complex made me think I planned it, but it wasn't my fault!

What Esther said about him knowing the old place was true. This couldn't be! Stepping through a rose-trellised gate Gordon blinked at the delightfully rambling house with the red roof and didn't know it. Gone was the baroque veranda and the slanted tower. A cobblestone path led up to a modern porch and a white door with a shiny brass knocker on it. Halfway down the path the door burst open and Esther ran into his arms.

"I've fixed a wonderful dinner for you, darling!" Esther crooned from the kitchen. "I thought it would be nice to be all alone our first night. Comfortable, darling?"

"Wonderful, wonderful." He yawned and looked around the room. Everything was new and shining. Then Esther began setting the table.

"I just love these old-fashioned oval tables, don't you, darling?" she chattered. "It doesn't quite fit in but I couldn't bear to part with it. Or these wonderful old dishes."

Gordon looked at the table and at the dishes. A faint twinge made his shoulders quiver under the port dressing gown Esther had given him as a home-coming gift, along with the slippers. It was as if someone were pinching his spinal cord with a fine pair of tweezers.

"Yes, dear," he said.

He looked at the dinner plate with the blue turkey design on it and burst with a sudden desire to retch. But he forced a tepid smile and wrenched his eyes away from the table and the plates. Everything was to be so perfect tonight. He told himself grimly that he would eat off one of those turkey plates if it killed him.

Just before she served the beef casserole Esther clapped her hands in feminine glee. "I've got something to show you, darling! The most wonderful thing I found!"

Gordon smiled indulgently as she ran out of the room. He was famished after his

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long bus ride, but he could wait. Esther got so excited about these little surprises. She was so sweetly feminine.

His smile died when Esther wheeled in the baby buggy, the oversize baby buggy.

"Of course I had to have it repainted, and a new cover put on," she prattled proudly. "Isn't it divine? It's so well made. Don't look so shocked, darling! I told you I want to have children, and I've always adored the idea of having twins. I just know that our first—"

"Take it away!"

"Why, darling! Don't be so provincial!"

"Take it away!" Gordon strangled.

"All right. Oh, I know why you're so touchy. You're hungry, poor darling." She wheeled the buggy out in the hall. "I'll hurry, dear. Dinner's coming right up. It's something very special, just for you!"

Gordon took his place at the table and tried to act like a new, happy husband. That the buggy was out of his sight helped. But here he was sitting at the same oval table, with those same round turkey plates staring him in the face. As she served Esther chattered on about her fondness for old dishes and silver. She held up a fork with an ornate handle. One of its tines was bent. Gordon stared.

"Isn't it lovely, darling?"

Gordon shivered. That bent tine. It was Cousin Aubrey's fork. He remembered the day it happened. He watched Esther put it in her mouth and shuddered.

"You haven't touched your dinner, darling!" Esther chided. "And I spent all afternoon cooking it, just for you."

Gordon looked down. "What—"

"Beef casserole, dear."

The plate of tender, spiced meat swam before his eyes. Under the drifting wisps of steam the pieces of beef seemed to dry and rot, like—

He shut his eyes and recited Dr. Folliger's litany of exorcism. *It wasn't my fault. The wind blew the door shut. I only thought I did it because. . . .*

"Silly me!" Esther exclaimed. "No wonder you're not eating. You never eat beef casserole without horse radish. You must have told me that a dozen times. I'll run right down and get it. I won't be a moment, darling."

Deep in his ghost-laying litany, Gordon didn't even hear her. His eyes were closed tightly, he muttered the words over and over. Then he opened his eyes. He looked across the table at Esther.

He screamed.

Esther heard him scream and slammed the refrigerator door shut hastily. Horse radish bottle in hand, she ran up the cellar steps. The door was shut. She turned the handle but it wouldn't open. It was snap-locked from the other side.

Nellie Fawcett knew all about the honeymooners, and she thought it prudent to wait a couple days before she brought over some of her nice home-made strawberry jam for their breakfast. She poked her head in the open kitchen window when no one answered her knock.

"Woo-woo!" she called.

A thudding sound from the hall was her answer. Nellie Fawcett frowned and cocked her head. It came again. It was like before, like somebody beating on the cellar door. Nellie Fawcett pursed her lips and hiked her bulk over the sill. She waddled down the hill. Funny. Funny how Cousin Aubrey's buggy had rolled down the hall and pushed the cellar door shut. She shoved it aside and opened the cellar door. Esther Keel fell into her arms, screaming, "Gordon! Gordon!"

They went in the dining room to find him. Why hadn't he answered? She had screamed and screamed. He must have heard her. Esther's fingers were torn, and the clotted blood on them matched the red streaks in the cellar door.

Why hadn't Gordon heard her, and let her out? Why?

He was sitting at the table. After two days, he was still sitting there.

"Gordon!" she cried.

He looked up at her with lack-lustre eyes, then he looked back down at the plate of beef casserole in front of him. Then he started to babble and drool hopefully. Gordon was hungry.

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He wasn't Might Have Been Murray, except in the world of fantasy.

Heading by Fred Humiston

Dead Man's Shoes

BY DAY KEENE

LATE Friday afternoon, or rather early Friday evening, when Al Murray the head cashier of the Bon Ton Department Store completed counting the week's cash and locked the vault on the proceeds of the Bon Ton's mid-August sale, he had not the remotest idea of returning Saturday night, packing one hundred and eighty thousand dollars into a suitcase and—leav-

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ing his wife and Los Angeles behind him—fleeing with Grace Ferris to Pandang, Singapore, and Bangkok, via Mexico City, San Salvador, and Lima.

It was, in a way, his wife's fault. She had been nagging him for months to take out more insurance. To keep peace in the family he had grudgingly consented. His application had, of course, necessitated a physical check-up, something he had neglected for years. And that was how he learned that he was to die.

The blow fell Saturday morning. There were a thousand and one things he wanted to do over the week-end. He wanted to spray his azaleas. He wanted to fix the bathroom screen. He had even thought they might pack a hamper with lunch and drive up to Santa Barbara Sunday morning to watch Al Junior play ball against San Diego.

Then all were suddenly unimportant. He, Al Murray, was going to die. When he had kept his check-up appointment the week before, Doctor Carr hadn't liked the sound of his heart or his mention of frequent spells of exhaustion. One test had led to another. He had been fluoroscoped and X-rayed. But it seemed it was the blood culture that counted. He listened more stunned than frightened as the white-haired, over-worked, under-staffed, family physician tried to soften the blow. As if such a blow could be softened.

Carr's words came to him in isolated little groups with dramatic silences between them— ". . . knew you'd want to know . . . still difficult for me to believe . . . suggest we call in a specialist . . . endocarditis . . . green virus . . . blood culture definitely shows . . . knew those spells of exhaustion.

It went on for what seemed like a long time, then Carr concluded the interview by shaking hands and saying he was sorry. "I'm sorry, too," Murray said as he rose to go.

The outer office was even more crowded than it had been. An elderly man took Murray's place in the inner office. A standing expectant mother, scarcely more than a girl, sat in the vacated chair. The nurse at the reception desk was new and flustered. She had difficulty in finding his card in the file.

"It's Murray. A. R. B. Murray. A for Al," Murray told her.

She found the card, totaled the outside X-ray and laboratory fees, added three dollars for the current visit, accepted his money and wrote a receipt. Murray was grimly amused. Doctors certainly had a racket. Even the last drink wasn't on the house. Dead or not, you paid for the horse.

The receipt written, the nurse poised her pencil over the appointment book. "And you are to come back, when?"

"I don't have to come back," Murray told her. "The Doc fixed me up. Yes. He fixed me up just fine."

After the comparative cool and semi-darkness of the office the street was bright and hot. He had expected it somehow to have changed. It hadn't. The dusty palms in the parkway still drooped listless in the sun. The curb was still jammed with cars. Saturday shoppers crowded the walk.

Murray glanced in the mirror in the window of a jewelry store. He, too, looked the same. He felt the same. He was tired but he didn't feel sick.

His lack of emotion puzzled him. He should be praying or cursing or something. He should be frightened, but he wasn't. Instead, for the first time in his life, he felt a cool detachment from his fellow man. He was no longer one of the mob. A year from now they would still be worrying about their jobs, being nagged by their wives for drinking too much beer, wondering how they were going to meet their mortgage payments. He was finished with all that now. The average hadn't held true in his case. Death, not life, would begin at forty.

HE FOUND his car in the Super-Market parking lot, its back seat piled high with groceries. Impervious to the heat, Mary was reading the Sunday funnies. Perspiration had streaked her make-up and plastered a dank lock of hair to her forehead. Even sitting down she bulged in places that she shouldn't and sagged in places she should bulge. She was thirty-nine, and looked it. Murray wondered why he had ever thought her attractive.

"You certainly took long enough," she

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greeted him. "What did you do? Stop for a beer?"

The driver of a panel truck looking for a place to park had braked and was waiting none too patiently for him to pull out of the parking space. It was hot and smelly in the car. Murray wanted time to think. It wasn't the time or the place to tell Mary.

"No. I didn't stop for a beer," he said.

"And Doctor Carr signed the application?"

He evaded the question by backing from the parking space. There was plenty of time to tell her.

"I'm a firm believer in insurance," she said for the two hundredth time. "It is ridiculous, the small amount that most men carry. And speaking of insurance, just the other day Mrs. Stewart was telling me. . . ."

Launched on one of her indeterminable, usually pointless stories, she talked as mechanically as he drove and Murray wondered suddenly how he had ever stood her for nineteen years True she had been pretty as a girl. They had been through a lot together. Mary had been a good wife to him. What little they had been able to save was due to her efficient management. She was a good cook and a good housekeeper. But surely there was more to life than that.

He wondered just how he would tell her and how she would react. Outside of financial problems, their garden, and their mutual pride in Al Junior, they hadn't had much in common these last years. It might be Mary wouldn't even care. After nineteen years of marriage, of scrimping, saving, cutting corners, their marital bed and board was probably as irksome to Mary as it had become to him.

His wife concluded his story. "And how much insurance do you think he left?"

Murray said he didn't know.

"Not one penny," she confided. "On top of the thirty thousand dollars he'd embezzled, he had cashed in his insurance policies and spent every dime of the money on the little snip who had been his secretary."

Murray had missed the first of the story but he hoped whoever she was talking about had enjoyed himself. It was a wonder more married men didn't kick over the traces. Perhaps the girl had looked like Grace. Even thinking of her was a pleasure. There was a tidy dish. More, she was available, at least to him. Not that she'd been forward. She hadn't. There had been nothing between them but a few experimental kisses, more or less deftly parried on her part. At least during office hours Grace was always a perfect lady. But there were ways that a man could tell. All he had to do was crook his little finger. It showed in the way she smoothed her skirt when she knew he was watching her, in the way she looked at him when he had finished his dictation—

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Murray?"

Will there be anything else, Mr. Murray? His mouth was dry. The palms of his hands were perspiring. He had better put Grace out of his mind. Girls like Grace cost money. Grace wasn't anyone's tramp. She wouldn't be content with a trip to Laguna Beach. She would want clothes, and furs, an apartment. No. Grace was way out of his class. Or was she?

He glanced at himself in the rear vision mirror. He was no Van Johnson but his face didn't scare little children. Outside of his bad ticker he was as much of a man as he ever had been. Other men of his age had affairs with their secretaries. Mary had just finished telling him of one.

"What happened to the guy?" he asked.

"What do you mean what happened?"

Murray was patient with her. "Just what I said. What happened when he got caught."

Mary acted like he was a moron. "I just finished telling you. That's how they found out he had cashed in his insurance. He went into their rumpus room the night before the annual audit, stupified himself with whiskey, and put a bullet into his mouth."

"Oh," Murray said. "I missed that."

INCUBATED by Doctor Carr's prognosis and hatched by the power of suggestion, the maggot of an idea began to lay its diseased eggs in his brain.

Life had cheated him. He hadn't gotten a square deal. All he had known was work. As a youth he had dreamed of travel, beauty, wealth, adventure, and position. He was

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going to the orient. He was going to marry a beautiful woman. Wealth, adventure and position would be his. Now, after nineteen years of hard work, with less than one year to go, not one of his dreams had come true.

His orient had consisted of a few Saturday night suppers in China Town. His only sea voyage had been to Catalina Island. Mary had been pretty. But that was years ago. He was married to an animated frump. He had less than four thousand dollars in the bank. Adventure had passed him by. He had been too young for one war, too old for the other. At thirty-nine he was no one of consequence. He was merely 'good old Al', the trusted cashier of a big department store, at less take-home salary per week than a journeyman plumber made.

The trusted cashier of a big department store.

Mary wanted to know if he had remembered to buy the Black Leaf 40 to spray the azaleas.

"For God's sake, shut up for just five minutes," he snapped at her. "Can't you see I'm thinking?" . . .

He was still thinking at four o'clock that afternoon. If there was a flaw in the plan he had conceived, he couldn't find it. He had nothing to fear from the law. He was above the law. The State of California couldn't put a dead man in prison. Once he had had his year, they could do what they pleased with his body.

Nor was there any use waiting. There would never be any more money in the store vault than there was tonight. And when a man had only three hundred and sixty-five days to live it was foolish to waste even one.

He reconnoitered the yard with his eyes. Mary was talking, as usual, this time over the back fence to Mrs. Almroth. The shadow cast by the pepper tree had lengthened. The transvaal and the blue-eyed daisies were closing their petals against the coming night. All up and down the street a merry whirring of sprinklers had begun. The fragrance of night blooming jasmine permeated the patio. It was cool. It was quiet. It was peaceful. Planning to do the thing he was, Murray realized with a sense of shame that he had been comfortable with Mary. And he was letting Mary down. He was running out on her.

On the other hand, with only a year to live he had a right to taste life. He had that much coming to him. It was better for him to go out like a gilded heel than a comfortable ox in a mortgaged stall.

Walking into the house he dialed Grace Ferris' number. He would leave the decision up to Grace. If her answer was no he would forget the whole thing. If her answer was yes—

"This is Al Murray," he told her without preamble when she answered. "I want to see you tonight, in about an hour. I—I have something to ask you, Grace. Do you want to see me or not?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then she laughed. "You took a long time, Al. I had almost given up hopes of you. All right. My apartment. In an hour."

His heart pounding, Murray bathed and shaved and put on his best suit. Grace had called him Al. She had expected him to phone her. Her remembered laughter caught in his throat and tied little knots in his groin. His lips were dry. The palms of his hands perspired. He had wasted time.

His fingers shook so badly he could scarcely knot his tie. He felt as if he was suffocating. Grace would be in his arms in an hour. There seemed little doubt as to what her decision would be. If her voice and general attitude were criterions, she would jump at the chance to leave a dull and poorly paid position for a year of luxury, adventure, and Al Murray. She had everything to gain. If anything should go wrong, he would be the one who had taken the money, if any.

HE CONSIDERED packing a bag and decided against it. A packed bag would entail explanations. He could pick up a bag in town, and anything else he needed when they reached Mexico City.

They would stay at the Hotel de la Reforma, he decided. "A suite," he would tell the clerk. Money would be no object.

A smudge of dirt on her nose, Mary was grubbing around the base of a rose bush as

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he walked out to the car. "Those darn sow bugs are at it again," she complained, then, glancing at him, rocked back on her heels in wifely suspicion. "Where are you going all dressed up?'

Sudden panic swept Murray. He was walking out on Mary. After nineteen years of almost constant association, of sharing one bed, one table, he was leaving her for good. If he left town, as planned, the odds were one hundred to one he would never see her again.

He managed to mumble, "Santa Monica," and invented a Retail Credit Men's Association dinner. "Almost forgot all about it."

"Oh," she accepted the explanation.

He stooped to kiss her but she had resumed her grubbing around the rose bush. "Well, don't be too late if you can help it. I thought we might pack a lunch and drive up to Santa Barbara tomorrow. You know how it would please Al."

Murray wished she hadn't mentioned Al. He drove out of the drive-way too fast, then forced himself to slow down. The matter of disgrace was one thing that couldn't be gotten around. It would hurt Mary, of course. But it would hurt Al Junior the most. Al wasn't ashamed of him. Al didn't think he was a failure. Al thought his old man was tops.

His year of freedom, adventure, ecstasy, in sudden jeopardy, Murray worked desperately to salve his conscience.

He wasn't really letting Mary down. The hot flame that once had welded them into a single entity had long since burned down to an ash. They had some money in the bank. Six more monthly payments would clear up the amortized mortgage on the house. His proposed theft could in no way touch her financially. With the money in the bank, plus his present insurance at the end of the year, she would have enough to carry her for three or four years if she was careful. She wasn't entirely unattractive. She might even marry again.

Al was young. He had a good start in life. At eighteen he was signed up on a big league baseball farm team. Next year, in two years at least, he would be playing big league ball and making all kinds of money. Time healed all wounds. Modern youth was morally calloused. Once he knew all the facts, Al would understand. In time he would probably even kid about it. . . .

"Yeah. My old man was a heller," he'd say. *"One day a doc slipped him the news he had only a year to live. So what did he do, sit down and bawl about it? He clipped his firm for a hundred and eighty grand, picked up a black-haired little dish, and grabbed him a handful of clipper for China."*

The wholly imaginary, and rather unsatisfying, monologue reminded Murray of a detail of his plan. On his way to Grace's apartment he must remember to stop in at the Pan-Pacific office and attempt to buy an immediate passage for Manila, now, tonight. It would be impossible to obtain on such short notice but he could pound on desks, act nervous, make himself remembered. It would serve two purposes. When the theft was discovered Monday the police would search for a single man. The scene in the Pan-Pacific office would also point to his supposed direction of flight. Before turning to other channels the police would spend at least several days checking all West Coast shipping.

That gave him Monday and Tuesday, and possibly Wednesday. His car might be found by then, but he and Grace would be miles away. They would be in Mexico City preparing for the next leg of their flight. Both of them were dark. He spoke Spanish fluently. They would fly to El Paso or Laredo and enter the country on easily procured tourist permits. But once south of the border they would vanish. The Senor and Senora something or other would supplant Al Murray and Grace Ferris. By the time it was known Grace was with him he would have purchased forged passports and they would be on their way to Guatemala.

Murray realized he was speeding again and forced himself to slow down to the proscribed twenty-five miles an hour.

From Guatemala they would go to Peru. He knew something of that country. Just the other day the store had received a letter from one of its buyers there stating that regular trans-Pacific shipping and pas-

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senger service had been restored again between Lima and most of the Far Eastern ports. Secure in their new identity, with one hundred and eighty thousand dollars to spend, he and Grace could take their time. They could, for example, book passage for Singapore, with stop-overs at Tahiti, Apia, any of a dozen romantic, palm-fringed islands. After that Timor, Pandang, Bangkok, Hongkong, Foochow, Shanghai.

MURRAY'S mood saddened. There was so much he wanted to see, and so little time in which to see it. Life wasn't fair. He had always lived a clean, Christian life. He had worked hard for long hours. He had contributed to the church, the Red Cross, the Community Chest. He had neither chased, nor stolen, nor blasphemed. He had never killed anyone. And what had it got him? A sentence of death at forty.

He parked in front of the apartment building in which Grace lived and sat looking up at the windows, one of which was hers. Once committed to that which he had in mind there would be no turning back. He felt suddenly nervous and shy. Heartburn replaced his armor. He had kidded with the boys about being a man among men. But except in the dim distant reaches of his youth, isolated cases best forgotten, he had never known any woman but Mary. There had been no need to know any.

He reached twice for the car door handle, and twice withdrew his hand. He had told Grace he would see her in an hour. Little more than half an hour had passed. Perhaps it would be best to go to the store first and get the money. Money talked. With one hundred and eighty thousand dollars in his possession there would be no need to feel shy. The money would talk.

All he would need to say would be, "Throw a few things in a bag. We're driving down to Los Vegas."

He could, of course, give Grace a hint they wouldn't be coming back. That would only be fair. It would give her a chance to pack any prized personal possessions. Women always had them. Take the storeroom at home for example. It was filled with trinkets of one kind and another. They were worth nothing in themselves but Mary would never part with them. They were unpacked and dusted off every time they moved. The silly letters he had written Mary when he was courting her . . . the lamp Aunt Sophie had given them for a wedding present . . . the one-eared, one-eyed, battered teddy bear that had been Al's constant bed companion until he had been five. Murray grinned as he thought of it. Al sure had been a card. He wouldn't go to sleep unless he had the fool bear in his arms. The hours he had spent looking for that bear. The box with one of Al's baby curls in it . . . the dolls he had bought for Pam when they had known Al was to have a sister. But Pam hadn't played with them long. . . .

His grin had become an aching grimace. Murray sat erect and lighted a cigarette. How had his mind ever got into the storeroom? It was a part with the past. The past was dead, and in a year so would he be. The thing to do was to think of himself, think of the next twelve months, of Grace, Timor, and Bangkok. The tinkling of temple bells, exotic sights and smells, the sun rising like thunder out of China, love, romance, sable nights and azure days.

On impulse he left the car, walked into the lobby of the building, and picking up a house phone asked the switchboard operator to connect him with Miss Ferris' apartment.

Again there was the same little catch of breath that did things to his anatomy as soon as Grace recognized his voice.

"Yes. I'm downstairs," he said in answer to her question. "But I'm not coming up right now. I have a little errand I want to take care of before I see you. An errand concerning us. I just wanted to hear your voice."

She said, "Oh!" pleased, then laughed.

Murray pressed his lips closer to the mouth piece of the phone. His heartburn was gone. The blood was pounding in his ears. He could actually feel her in his arms, her slim, lithe, warm, young body, a blazing torch that seared his senses. A husk in his voice he asked, "Look, honey. How would you like to go to Los Vegas?"

"Tonight?"

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"Tonight."

"With you?"

"With me."

Her voice caught in her throat again. "I —I'd love to, Al."

"Good," Murray said. "Good. We'll leave in about a half hour. Throw a few things in a bag. Throw quite a few things in a bag." He skirted the truth. "I don't know how long we may be gone or just where we may wind up."

HE HUNG up before she could question him and swaggered as he left the lobby. Timor, Bangkok, Grace, a suite at Raffles in Singapore. His past thirty-nine years might have been dull but he would make this last one count. He'd *make* his dreams come true.

It was seven by the time he reached the heart of town. The luggage shop where he had planned to buy a bag was closed but he found a Main Street pawn shop open and bought a battered tan leather traveling bag that would serve his purpose.

Out on the walk again, the street seemed strangely quiet and deserted without its day time crowds. Here and there a couple strolled or paused to window shop, but the hurry and the bustle of the business day had been replaced by an almost cathedral-like silence. There were few taxi cabs and fewer private cars. As Murray emerged from the pawn shop a police car cruised by on the far side of the street.

He studied its receding tail lights thoughtfully, his throat muscles tightening slightly. He had told Grace, *"I have a little errand I want to take care of before I see you. An errand concerning us."*

Pure trivia. A minor thing. All he intended to do was pack a twenty dollar traveling bag with one hundred and eighty thousand dollars that did not belong to him.

Fear entered his mind for the first time since he had made his decision. It probed with experimental fingers at his stomach, his groin, his heart, during the brief scene he made in the Pan-Pacific office near the Biltmore when he was courteously informed the next flight to Manila was filled. Fear nagged his heels as he parked his car in the deep

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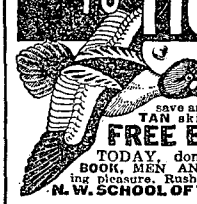

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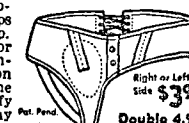

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shadows of the Bon Ton parking lot and crossed the paving to the locked side door.

The store closed at noon on Saturdays during July and August. During the same period, due to his length of service and position, he wound up his week on Friday night so as to have his week-end free. Johnson, his assistant, computed and banked Saturday morning's receipts. On every second Friday, of which the preceding day had been one, the week's receipts were held inviolate in the vault against the bi-monthly pay-roll. Johnson didn't have access to the vault. But the youthful assistant cashier was an eager beaver. He popped in and out at odd times. He worked long hours of his free time poring over the books of the store, familiarizing himself with its general financial set-up against the day when he would step into Murray's shoes. There was no time lock on the vault. But, on the other hand, he had no logical reason to open and enter the vault until nine o'clock Monday morning. If young Johnson should be in the office it would complicate matters.

Murray forced a calm he did not feel. There was nothing about his appearance at the store to excite suspicion. As with Johnson, he often worked odd and long hours. He hadn't risen to be cashier of the Bon Ton by keeping one eye on the clock. But the theft *couldn't* be discovered until Monday morning. He *had* to have that much time.

Kelly, the chief guard, unlocked the door in answer to his rapping. A bluff, elderly, man with close-cropped white hair he was genuinely glad to see Murray. He greeted him with respect, then wanted to know what brought him back to the store at seven-fifteen on a hot summer's night.

Murray patted his traveling case. "I came back to rob it, Jim," he told him, straight-faced. "I'm going to load the receipts from the August clearance sale in here and skadaddle to Alaska with the boodle."

Kelly left off mopping at his face and laughed until he had to hold his sides. "Buy two tickets," he called after Murray. "I'l clean out the petty cash-tills and come with you."

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It was hot in the store with the air-conditioning unit turned off for the week-end. Murray left him laughing, mopping at his face, and took the self service elevator to the office floor.

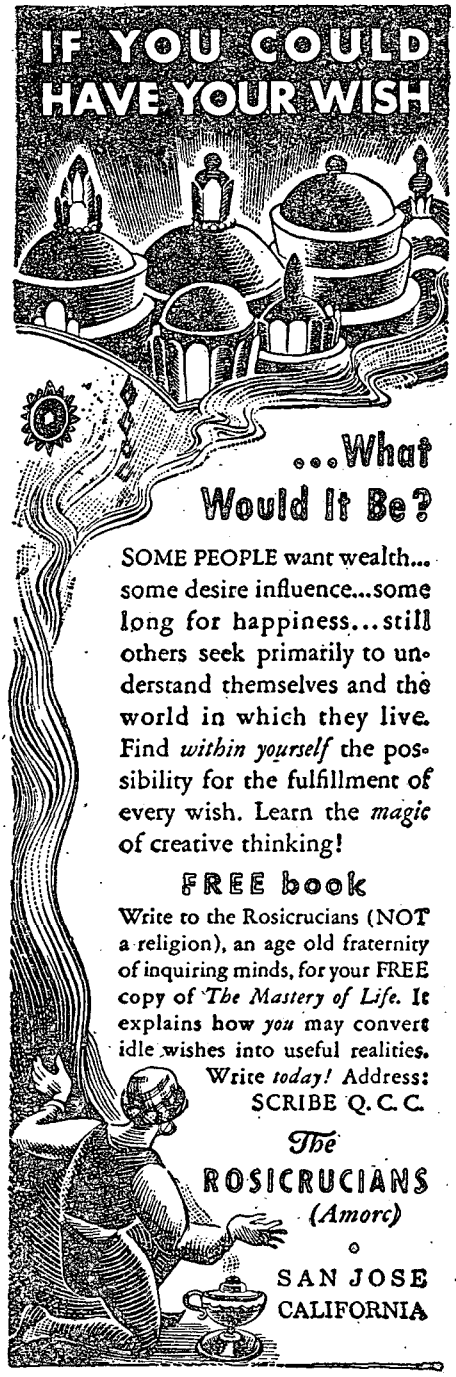
The fourth floor guard saluted him smartly and, his pistol bulging largely on his hip, continued his patrol. Johnson was not at his desk. Here and there, as per store regulations, a desk lamp had been left lighted but the big outer office was deserted. Murray went directly to his own private office and switched on the light. A few feet behind his desk the massive steel door of the vault, set flush with the rough plaster of the wall, gleamed dully. He dropped the traveling bag in front of it, then, from sheer force of habit, looked at the statement sheet on his blotter.

It had been a good Saturday morning for August. Household Utensils and Yard Goods were off but Ladies Dresses had more than equalized their quota. Shane was a smart buyer. With a few more department heads like Shane——

MURRAY shook his head doggedly. The future of the Bon Ton had nothing to do with him now. He had himself to think of. He had made his decision. All that remained to be done was pack the money in the bag, pick up Grace, and get out of town. He would leave the car in Los Vegas and fly to El Paso or Laredo, whichever flight left first. By the time the theft was discovered and a search was instigated he would be in Mexico City.

The tips of his fingers tingling, he felt in his pocket for a cigarette, found he had none and opened the bottom drawer of his desk to get a package from the carton.

The condition of the drawer was a disgrace. He had meant to clean it out for years but had never quite gotten around to it, it was such a handy catch-all. Under one full and one emptied carton of cigarettes, a stack of dog-eared travel folders, most of them pre-war, were jumbled up with equally dog-eared inter-office memoranda that hadn't been important enough to file but that he had saved for one rea-



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son or another, the expensive, unsmoked, pipe the wagon men had given him the time he had gone to bat for them in the matter of a raise, a pair of Mary's gloves, the few personal letters that Al had written him from boot camp. A punk kid seventeen, and in the Navy.

Murray picked up one of the letters and weighed it in his palm. Hoping that Al would understand had been whistling in the dark. Al wasn't the sort of boy to boast about the skeletons in the family closet. When other men spoke of their fathers he'd merely never mention him. Or, if Al did speak of him, he would speak of some childhood incident, the time they had gone deep sea fishing off Newport . . . their camping trip up at Big Bear . . . . the summer the three of them had driven up to Klamath Falls to see Mary's brother. He would never boast his father had embezzled money and left his mother for a younger woman. The fact he had only twelve months to live wouldn't mitigate Al's feelings. He would consider him a quitter, a loud mouth who after years of popping off about honesty, loyalty, and marital fidelity, had been too weak-kneed to toe the mark when the big test had come.

Dropping the letter back into the drawer, his cigarette still unlighted, Murray picked up a sheet of inter-office memoranda. It was a tabulation of an office collection amounting to sixteen dollars and fifty cents, for what, or for whom, he could not recall. One of the girls had left or gotten married, and he had given two dollars.

He wadded it into a ball and opened the account book to a page that began;

Week of May 22nd

Lunches	$ .60
Cigarettes	3.00
Gasoline	4.89
Hotel (Amr. plan) ..	120.00

He remembered the week. It had really begun on a Tuesday. He had come to work that Monday but Monday night Mary had cried so hard he had begged the rest of the

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week off and had driven her up to Santa Cruz in the hope of, if not assuaging her grief, getting her away briefly from the rows of little dresses in the closet, and the stubbed-toed little shoes, and stamp sized underthings that had to be packed away or given to a more fortunate family.

HARD-EYED, he dropped the book back in the drawer, kicked the drawer shut and twirled the combination on the vault. He couldn't live in the past. In twelve months he would be one with it. He had those twelve months to think of and he must act now.

The vault door open, he reached for the bag. What did it matter to him, a man with twelve months to live, if he was betraying two trusts, that he was running out on Mary, that he was failing a firm in whose employ he had risen from stock boy to cashier? Grace was waiting for him. All he had to do was put the money in the bag, close the door of the vault and walk out of the store. No one would question him. No one would stop him. By the time the theft was discovered he would be safe in Mexico City. Beyond Mexico lay Guatemala and Peru.

He reached for a sheaf of money, then knew that he couldn't do it. He couldn't steal. He couldn't walk out on Mary. He hadn't lied to Al when he had tried in a fatherly way to impress on him the well stated fact of unknown authorship that—

Sow a Thought, and you reap an Act;
Sow an Act, and you reap a Habit;
Sow a Habit, and you reap a Character;
Sow a Character, and you reap a Destiny.

He had lived on the right side of the fence too long. Cashiers worthy of the name didn't abscond with their firm's money. He had promised his God and Mary to love, honor, and support her until death parted them. He would have to keep his bargain. He wanted suddenly to keep it. Mary was suddenly lovely in his eyes. He didn't want to part from her. Their flesh was one. Her spirit and her love had never wavered. Even

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in the matter of the insurance that had started this whole thing she hadn't been thinking of herself. She hadn't been thinking of him. She had insisted it be an endowment policy, something for *them* to live on when he could no longer work. Us, We, Mr. and Mrs. Al Murray, an inseparable entity.

He closed and locked the vault, sat down at his desk and taking the account book from the jumbled drawer read through it page by page—

The first payment on the house . . . the time Al had broken his arm . . . the new davenport for the living room . . a grocery bill . . . a bouquet of flowers on mother's day . . . a lawnmower . . . a rhododendron they couldn't afford . . . an azalea they could afford . . . twenty dollars to the church's organ fund . . . ten dollars to the Red Cross . . . perpetual care and a small granite cross . . .

It wasn't an account book. It was a record of dreams bought and paid for. Dreams with fairer scenes than any palm-fringed south sea lagoon, with sweeter music running through them than the tinkling of any foreign temple bells. He must have been out of his mind. His life hadn't been meager. It had been rich and full. He would be sorry to leave it.

He was still thumbing through the account book when Kelly came in at midnight and wanted to know if he was going to work all night.

"No," Murray told him, "No. I'm leaving for home in a few minutes, Jim. Just as soon as I make a phone call."

It was a difficult call to make. He made no attempt to explain. He merely told Grace not to expect him—ever, and hung up with her opinion of him meaning nothing in his ears. He wanted to get home to Mary. He wanted to spend as much time with her as possible.

It was cooler in the car and pleasant driving. The sky was a black velvet net with a fabulous haul of silver stars. The moon was a shining promise. He felt no fear, only a great regret that in so short a time he had to leave anything so beautiful.

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IT WAS at the corner of Van Nuys Boulevard, less than two miles from his house, that the police radio car crowded him to the curb and after checking the make of his car and its license the alert young patrolman wanted to know if his name was Al Murray.

Puzzled, Murray admitted it was and produced his driver's license.

"It's him," the patrolman informed his partner. "You follow along behind us. I'll ride down to the station with him." So saying he got into the car with Murray and told him to drive to the Valley Station.

Murray protested, "Now wait. Just one minute, officer. What is this all about? I haven't done a thing.'

"That's fine," the patrolman informed him. "I'm glad we got to you in time." He added cheerfully. "You see it isn't so, chum."

Murray considered the statement. The more he considered it, the less sense that it made. "You got to me in time for what?"

THE patrolman explained, as to a slightly stupid child. "In time to keep you from doing anything. You see when the doc calls your wife she knows you have lied to her about going to the Retail Credit Men's Association dinner on account of it was last week you forgot it, and she's afraid you are going to do a Dutch. So she comes down to the station and she pounds on desks and cries on the inspector's shoulder until he agrees to put out a radio pick-up on you."

His throat muscles contracted, Murray asked, "Then Mary knows? Doctor Carr called my wife? Mary knows I have only twelve months to live?"

The patrolman was patient with him. "Sure. Like I just told you, chum. Only it ain't so. See? The doc gets stewing about your case after office hours on account of the laboratory report don't exactly jibe with his own general findings. So about nine o'clock he goes over the whole thing again and finds the laboratory has made a mistake and sent him a report on a guy named M. H. B. Murray while your initials are not quite that. And his nurse and him being so rushed they don't catch it at the time and

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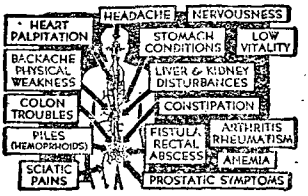

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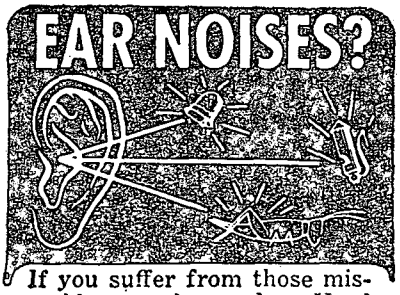

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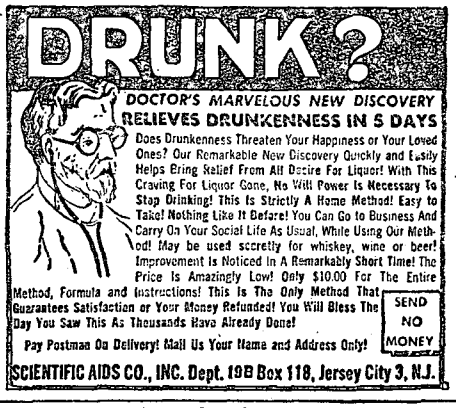

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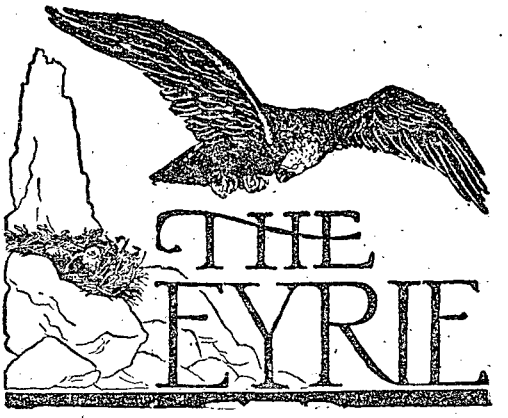
he gives you a bum steer. Catch on? It ain't you, it's this other Murray who's got his travel orders. One of them coincident things. But that don't do you any good if you jump off the Santa Monica pier or pump yourself full of monoxide."

Murray gripped the steering wheel hard. It wasn't so. He wasn't going to die. A mistake had been made, whose fault did not matter. But a queer thought struck him. M. H. B Murray—*Might Have Been Murray, Might Have Been Me,* either way you looked at it it was strange, unreal. But it had happened. Then he thought of Mary and smiled. Mary was waiting for him. Mary wanted him. He was glad he was not M. H. B. Murray, except in the realm of fantasy. He was himself.

"You're okay? You can drive?" the patrolman asked.

His eyes shining, Murray nodded. "Yes. I can drive," he told him.



Good in Any Decade

ON THE contents page of this issue of WEIRD TALES appears the name of Ed—E. Hoffmann to you—Price, a name which has been missing lately from our pages, but one which used to appear frequently not so long ago. It has a special significance, Price writes, because it appears in our first 1950 issue—January is out in December—and counts as an anniversary with him. Even without any nostalgic impulses or fond remembrances we liked "The Shadow of Saturn"; here is the letter that came with the manuscript:

I remember, a long time ago, my first appearance in WEIRD TALES: the January, 1925 issue. I had just written the *"Stranger From Kurdistan,"* and your preceding editor was wearing a gas mask, carrying a Geiger counter, and handling the MS with tongs, trying to build up enough courage to hand it to the printer—which he finally did, and there was only a reasonable degree of atomic fission, or that day's equivalent thereof. This present yarn is by no means so spectacular. All this is purely from the reminiscent mood which old files of W.T. evoke: and those files, many months ago, persistently reminded me that it would soon be twenty-five years, yea, one-quarter of a century, since I first appeared on the newsstands in W.T.

While I hope of course that you like *"Shadow of Saturn,"* there is always a 50th anniversary, you know!

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Though not in the way I have fictionized it, I have several times encountered in my astrological practice such "Siamese triplets" as those whose doings I describe. But that's neither here nor there: from here on, it's all yours.

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Not Just Tabulations by a Long Shot

WE HAVE been under considerable pressure to revive the Eyrie, and we always thought it was a good idea anyway so were glad to concur and oblige. *But*—we have long since decided that letters merely tabulating preferences and saying that the writer liked one story better than another or one heading less than any we'd ever printed made exceedingly dull reading, though valuable to us here in the shop. So we are not going to print letters which merely say, "I liked such and such a story and didn't like the one on page 88." If you liked a story tell us the point or the idea that interested you; write us any sidelights that may occur to you, discuss anything and everything in our field at large, but don't send us lists that look like something for the statistical department, with ratings worked out in mathematical fashion. They aren't weird enough.

Here are a few bits from letters received about the last issue: this comment is a bit double-edged, but we pass it on. MICHAEL VARADY says, *"Your January issue was really a nice surprise. You haven't had, I think, such a good ish in just about ten years. Almost all the stories were excellent, and it was good to see the Eyrie back."* It was our impresh that we had had some other good numbers lately. A. HAYES says, *"Congratulations on not having a section dealing with readers' letters."* Well, we are cutting them short. A comment from W. M. AUSTIN interested us; he said, *"'The Cactus' in your January issue was a really weird yarn in the best tradition of the magazine."* The story was picked from the unsolicited pile by the newest member of our editorial staff, so we are glad that this new writer (and Editor) invoked commendation; the story was by Mildred Johnson.

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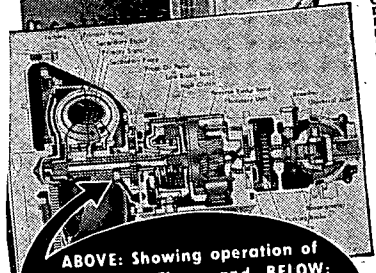

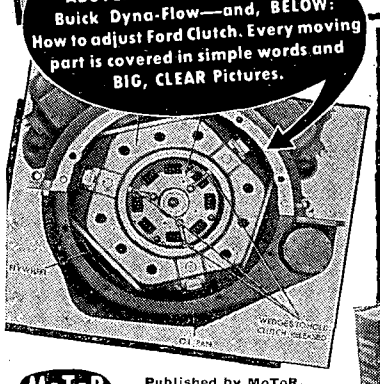

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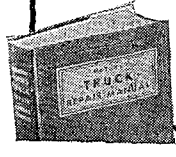

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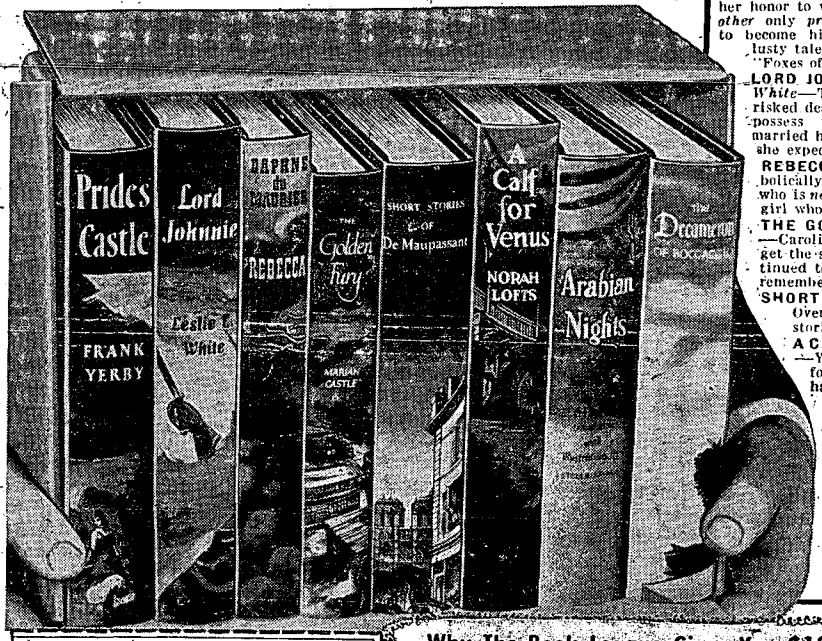

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